8 DOCUMENTARY, EXPERIMENTAL FILMS

This Film Is Not Yet Rated (2006), directed by Kirby Dick

IFC/NETFLIX/BBC/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

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ANIMATED, AND

In film studies there are various ways to categorize the range of movies that compose the medium. We can organize movies by date, by nation, by language, by author, and by genre. We can further distinguish between films with regard to fiction/nonfiction, live-action/drawn, fabricated or constructed, and narrative/nonnarrative, which brings us here to three distinct alternative film categories: documentary, animation, and experimental. These alternative films use the constituent elements of mainstream live-action fiction—mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound—but do so in often unique ways.

Documentary films endeavor to re-present lived experience, focusing on real people and real events. **Animated films** are produced by changing drawings or images or deftly manipulating objects frame by frame, and though these films stage gags or tell stories much as live-action pictures do, they seldom feature live actors or nature captured in motion by a camera. **Experimental films**, as the term suggests, experiment with form and style. Many experimental films are also labeled **avant-garde** because they push the boundaries of accepted norms with regard to storytelling, artistic presentation, and cultural representation.

Documentary, animated, and experimental films offer a rewarding alternative to live-action narrative films. A close reading of these films can examine how they adhere to and deviate from the principles of film form that we examined in chapters 2 through 6.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

8-1 Identify and analyze the different goals and techniques of documentary filmmaking from the earliest short films to the present.

8-2 Recognize and appreciate the diversity of animation styles and the blend of artistic imagination and technological innovation that have characterized the development of this film category.

8-3 Develop an awareness and understanding of films that deliberately attempt to shock, provoke, and challenge audiences by breaking the rules of conventional filmmaking and society.

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documentary Films that present themselves as works of nonfiction, as factual and trustworthy, and ask us to view them as such.

animated film An alternative to live-action film composed of pen-and-ink drawings, illustrations on transparent cels, fabricated models, or computer-designed images.

experimental, or avant-garde, film A type of film that challenges widely held notions of what movies can or should be and that often challenges the status quo.

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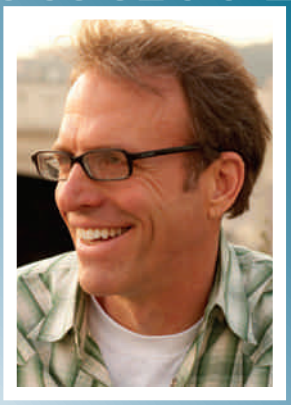
MAKING MOVIES



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KIRBY DICK ON DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

Kirby Dick is a documentary filmmaker who has made some of the genre's most thought-provoking and controversial films. His directing credits include *Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate* (1986); *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997); *Twist of Faith* (2004); *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006); and *The Invisible War* (2012). He received an Academy Award nomination for his feature documentary *Twist of Faith* in 2005 and won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012 for *The Invisible War*.

Q1: How do you define a documentary film? What distinguishes it from a narrative, fiction film?

A: Defining a documentary is always interesting . . . if somebody calls something art, it's art. If someone calls something a documentary, then it's a documentary.

Q2: How do you choose a topic for a documentary?

A: If I'm going to spend two years of my life on something, I want to make sure that I end up with something worthwhile, but more importantly, it has to be something I will be interested in the whole time. I look for complexity. I look for subject matter that can operate on a number of levels. I look for a story arc. I look for some sort of political content. I've always looked for some kind of psychological content. Dealing with psychological content allows you to reflect on the subject matter in the deepest way. Finally, I look for a way of covering something that hasn't been done before.

Q3: Many documentaries take shape in the editing room. How do you decide what footage to use and what not to use?

A: I try to shoot anything and everything I might possibly want to use—because you will be surprised on occasion. I give cameras to my subjects and let them shoot. I look for any kind of home video material. I look for letters. I take stock footage and news footage. Sometimes I get people together who might not otherwise get together. While I'm shooting a scene I can usually figure out how I might use a line or a certain vérité moment. But once I get into the editing room . . . that's the writing stage. I think about what is the arc of the film—the narrative arc, the emotional arc, the intellectual arc, an argument that's moving forward. I have this idea in advance of what will probably work. I want to set up a situation for discovery in the editing room. I know what I'm looking for, but I don't necessarily know what I'll get.

Q4: Jean-Luc Godard once said that "film is truth at 24fps." And Josef von Sternberg stated that "all film is fiction film." Where do you stand on this debate?

A: I go with von Sternberg. You know, Godard's statements are always said with tongue in cheek. This idea of objectivity or truth in documentary—and truth, that's a word I cringe at when I hear it—this notion that documentary filmmakers are truth-tellers suggests that they are somehow more truthful than other artists. I don't buy it.

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8-1 DOCUMENTARY

The filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard famously quipped that "film is truth at 24 frames per second," a remark that suggests that whatever the camera films and the sound recordist records is a true capture of a given moment in time. Josef von Sternberg, another legendary movie director, put forward an alternative: "All film is fiction film," suggesting that the moment a camera is engaged and a tape recorder switched on, reality is inevitably altered and affected. We need not settle on one or the other, but it is important to acknowledge that cinema uniquely captures and re-presents reality just as it sensationalizes it, and that movies render their subjects larger than life—even if what they capture is essentially the stuff of everyday life.

Film scholars routinely distinguish between realistic fiction films and documentaries by focusing on two things: (1) the way the films are presented to audiences (how they are defined by the films' makers) and (2) the consequent expectations audiences bring to the screening of the films. In other words, documentaries identify themselves as works of nonfiction—as factual and trustworthy—and ask us to view them as such. That said, when we watch a documentary, we are presented with the same basic ingredients or elements of form and content—mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound—as we would have with a fiction film. And though documentaries seldom follow narrative formulas (like genre films do, for example), they do tell a story. And that story can be told with varying degrees of authorial intervention and varying amounts of narration and commentary.

This chapter introduces five types of documentary films: actualities, ethnography (including travelogue), propaganda, direct cinema, and the subjective (or first-person) documentary. The goal here is to discuss a range of documentary projects that evince different styles and goals and then, with regard to each of these categories, to establish a foundation for critically reading.

8-1a Actualities and Other Slices of Life

The first public demonstration of Edison's Kinetograph (the photographic apparatus that produced the pictures) and Kinetoscope (the "peep-show" viewing machine that exhibited them) at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in May 1893 featured a documentary

8.1 *Blacksmith Scene* (1893), the first of many slice-of-life documentaries produced for the Edison Manufacturing Company.

short titled *Blacksmith Scene*, which showed three men, all Edison employees, pounding on an anvil for approximately 20 seconds (fig. **8.1**). The "performers" in the film are not blacksmiths. And the anvil is not in a blacksmith's workshop but in the Edison film studio. The question of authenticity is already at issue here in this very early documentary, but the filmmakers' little deception is not the defining issue.

Documentaries are defined in part by their mode or style or form of presentation, not only or not necessarily by their representation of an absolute fact or truth. Audiences are of course free to consider and evaluate a documentary's "truth claim," its formal and philosophical relationship to some objective reality or realism. Here Edison endeavored to preserve for posterity an occupation very much in evidence in the 1890s but likely to have diminished importance in the coming century. It was much easier to shoot the scene at the studio, so that's what he did. As we consider the film's truth claim, it is worth considering whether it matters much that, while the blacksmith tasks depicted are indeed accurately represented, as in a fiction film the setting is constructed and contrived.

Subsequent Edison **slice-of-life documentaries** (e.g., *Edison Kinetoscope Record of a Sneeze* [aka *Fred*

slice-of-life documentaries Short films produced for the Edison Manufacturing Company that captured everyday events.

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8.2 Edison's slice-of-life documentary *The Barber Shop* (W. K. L. Dickson and William Heise, 1894).

8.3 Eugene Sandow, the strongman, whose "pose-down" was captured in a documentary short for the Edison Manufacturing Company. *Sandow* (W. K. L. Dickson, 1896).

Ott's Sneeze, Dickson, 1894] and *American Gymnast* [1894])—shared a basic goal to preserve for posterity everyday life. And they shared a simple aesthetic. Akin to the still-photo portrait, filmed figures are posed in front of a flat, black backdrop captured by a stationery camera placed at a right angle to the action. The films are composed of a single shot, or take, and begin as the camera is turned on and end as the film magazine runs out and the camera is shut off. Such a style simulates for the filmgoer the experience of attending a live event: an unobstructed, unmediated, and unedited view of the action.

This same basic premise is in play in *The Barber Shop* (fig. **8.2**), an early Edison short that showed a barber plying his trade. It too was shot at the Edison studio, but *The Barber Shop* presents a significant aesthetic change: the addition of props (the barber pole at screen left and the sign at the rear of the frame: "The Latest Wonder . . ."). The props set the scene of a real barbershop for filmgoers, further distracting from the reality of its production (at Edison's studio).

Among the many slice-of-life Edison films made for commercial exhibition in the 1890s were shorts featuring some of the era's celebrities, for example, the Austrian muscleman Eugene Sandow, who agreed to appear in the film in exchange for a chance to meet Edison in person (fig. **8.3**), and the markswoman Annie Oakley in the *Wild West Show* films (1894). From these films we get a look at what passed for beauty or excellence, and at what interested people, at a certain moment in history.

actualities Slice-of-life documentaries produced by the Lumière brothers at the end of the nineteenth century.

On December 28, 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière became the first filmmakers to screen a program of projected motion pictures to a paying audience. The first film on the bill, *Leaving the Lumière Factory,* employed a stationary camera placed strategically to depict two doorways, one large and one small, that are eventually filled as the workers exit the factory (fig. **8.4**). Unlike the Edison films, these **actualities** (so-called because they realized on film actual scenes from everyday life) were shot outdoors. Such a mobile documentary technique suggests a greater truth claim than Edison's studio-bound films at the time, but this is misleading. To suit certain basic aesthetic goals, when the Lumières arrived at a location, they endeavored to direct or choreograph action with regard to camera position and distance. The

8.4 *Leaving the Lumière Factory (Sortie d'usine),* an actuality produced by Auguste and Louis Lumière in 1895.

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8.5 *The Baby's Meal (Repas de bébé),* a Lumière brothers' actuality and most likely the first home movie (1895).

8.6 Pictorial realism in Joseph-Louis Mundwiller's 1909 travelogue *Moscow Clad in Snow*.

participants are blocked and move about the frame strategically, and the camera is placed with an eye on symmetry or three-dimensionality (as opposed to providing a right-angle view of the action).

Another film from the show on December 28 was *The Baby's Meal* (fig. **8.5**). It was basically a home movie designed to be a model for future consumer-made home movies. Such a future has of course been realized as many of our own lives have indeed been captured and saved for posterity on Super 8 and video. Home movies are documentaries, capturing the everyday lives of everyday people.

8-1b Ethnography and Travelogue

As movies became more of a commercial enterprise in the early twentieth century, documentary filmmakers needed to attract audiences with something sensational or exotic. Indeed, one of the most popular silent cinema genres was the **ethnographic film** and its subset, the **travelogue**. These anthropological studies and exotic travelogues used the new invention of cinema to give filmgoers who could scarcely dream of travel a look at places and cultures from the far reaches of the globe.

A noteworthy early documentary was Joseph-Louis Mundwiller's 1909 travelogue for Pathé Frères, *Moscow Clad in Snow* (fig. **8.6**). Less concerned with the history of the city of Moscow or the lives of any individual living there than he is in the look of the city, Mundwiller provides an elegant tour—the sort of thing a very lucky tourist might get on a picturesque winter's day. The film is composed of a series of tableaus, carefully framed images that offer no pretense to spontaneity. Instead Mundwiller offers beautifully framed and filmed images that present Moscow "clad in snow" as a wonderful place.

The best-known ethnographic filmmaker during the late silent and early sound era was Robert Flaherty, an American-born explorer who fully embraced the Rousseauian ideal that human beings are happiest when living simply and in harmony with nature. Flaherty's two best known films, *Nanook of the North* (fig. **8.7** and **8.8**), set in the frozen terrain of Canada's Hudson Bay region, and *Man of Aran* (fig. **8.9**), set on the rugged Aran Islands off the coast of Ireland, focus on two unlikely destinations for even the most intrepid traveler. Flaherty was drawn to these exotic places by his interest in filming people unaffected and uncorrupted by modernity, clinging still to the traditions and tasks that had been practiced there for centuries.

Flaherty was a true documentarist; he lived with his subjects for a year or more in order to observe and understand their everyday lives. That said, by contemporary standards, his ethnographic work is more romantic than realistic. For example, in one of the most memorable sequences in *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty films a walrus hunt (fig. **8.7**). The scene supports the film's central paradox of man's harmony in and struggle with nature, but the mise-en-scène, camera work, and composition reveal that the scene is carefully staged. The camera is placed in the perfect spot. Nanook goes to his mark, waits, and then in frame performs the task at hand.

ethnographic film A film that documents the way of life in a foreign land.

travelogue A film that presents a tour of a foreign land.

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8.7 Nanook the Eskimo in *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922).

8.8 Nanook and his family captured in an extreme long shot, rendered small against the vast white landscape of the arctic.

Later in the film, Nanook hunts a seal swimming beneath the ice. Again, Flaherty films the scene with a stationary camera strategically placed to give the viewer an ideal look at the action. He places us close enough to really see how this premodern form of hunting is performed. The scene runs for nearly 5 minutes, an unusually long duration that highlights the difficulty of the task. Flaherty is interested both in documenting a process or task from start to finish and in lingering on a beautiful, romantic, even sentimental image. This is evident as well in the many extreme long shots of the arctic landscape, the very sort of long take that would later come to characterize and romanticize the movie western. Flaherty uses these shots to make a point about scale: as in figure **8.8**, we see Nanook, his family, and his sled dogs rendered small against a vast landscape.

8.9 A full-figure shot casting the hero, a premodern hunter-gatherer against the treacherous yet beautiful elements in Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934). Note the similarity between this shot and the shot of Nanook in figure **8.7**.

8-1c The Propaganda Film

During the worldwide economic Depression of the 1930s, the lead-up to World War II, and then the war years themselves, many nonfiction filmmakers fully embraced the persuasive power of the big screen and produced **propaganda films** to propose and promote a political agenda. These films were often financed and supervised by nationalized film industries or film agencies within the government. We tend to view propaganda as a pejorative term today, as work designed to trick or mislead. But such a narrow view fails to account for the primary goal of propaganda films: to persuade.

propaganda film A film that promotes a political agenda.

In the United States, for example, filmmakers like Pare Lorentz (*The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936), financed by the federal government, offered a political commentary on the struggles of the everyday American during the Depression. Others, like Willard van Dyke and Ralph Steiner (*The City*, 1939) outlined possible avenues towards fixing some of America's economic and social problems. These films do not endeavor to trick or mislead, but they do carry an overt political message, one consistent with the New Deal and the politics of the Roosevelt administration, the very political establishment that financed their production.

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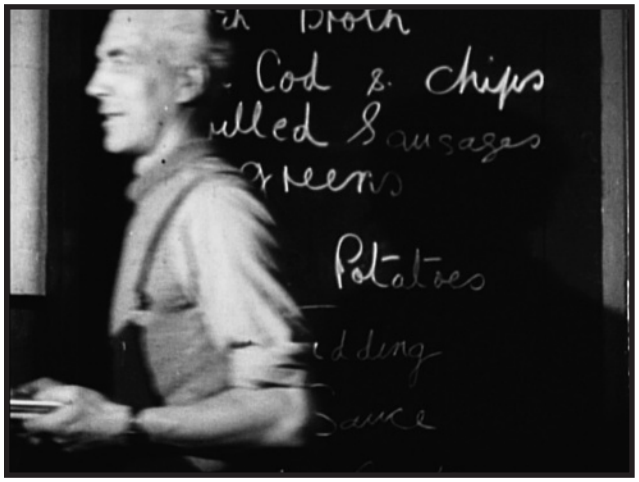
After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States Film Unit, established in 1938 to promote the agenda of President Roosevelt's New Deal, worked with the Office of War Information to introduce the *Why We Fight* series. These films were produced to combat lingering isolationism (doubts about our entrance into the war) and to educate American servicemen and the American public about the causes and potential consequences of the global conflict. These wartime documentaries were produced and directed by a who's who of Hollywood narrative moviemakers—Frank Capra, John Huston, and William Wyler—who established a variety of documentary techniques widely used today: maps, charts, and other informative graphics (fig. **8.10**), voice-of-God narration (in which an authoritative offscreen voice narrates the images on screen), talking-head segments (in which an expert uses direct address to offer commentary), and the sampling or compiling of film clips from other documentary sources recontextualized to fit the agenda put forth in the film (e.g., the use of clips from Nazi documentaries, first produced in Germany to celebrate the Nazi regime, then re-cut and re-contextualized to reveal, in the U.S. documentaries, the inherent threat posed by Hitler's Germany).

In Great Britain as well federally funded social-realist films focusing on everyday people struggling with everyday challenges during the Depression gave way to wartime propaganda films. In the 1930s, the celebrated documentary producer John Grierson headed the government funded GPO Film Unit and supervised the production of films that, much like the United States Film Unit, focused on social issues during the years leading up to the war, for example, Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935) and Alberto Cavalcanti's *Coal Face* (1935). After England was drawn into the war, the GPO Unit was renamed the Crown Film Unit. It sponsored wartime documentaries, some of which focused on military battles (*Desert Victory*, David MacDonald, 1943) while others like *Listen to Britain* (fig. **8.11**) focused on the little things of everyday life that the war had disrupted.

We tend to view the propaganda that supports the victorious side differently from that of the vanquished, and we tend to view films that traffic in political persuasion that we agree with differently from films that may be structured similarly but promote a political argument we fundamentally reject. The Nazi-era documentaries made by Leni Riefenstahl—*Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938)—were financed by the Ministry of Propaganda, a federal agency supervised by the ruling party. With regard to mode of financing and their support of the nation's ruling party, Reifenstahl's films are similar to the *Why We Fight* series and the Crown Unit films. The otherwise significant differences among these films rest not in production context, but in content.

8.10 A voice-of-God narrator describes the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia as a graphic map of Europe shows the extent of German imperialism in *The Nazi's Strike* (1943), a *Why We Fight* film.



8.11 Crown Film Unit documentaries often focused on quaint English traditions that might be lost if the Nazis won the war—for example, the freedom to congregate in and enjoy a meal at a proper British pub. *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings, 1942).

In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl filmed a 1934 Nazi Party rally, presenting flattering images of its leader (fig. **8.12**) and his followers, veritable poster children of the so-called master race (fig. **8.13**). Riefenstahl's primary goal was to generate excitement about a Nazi future, and she did so with the financial support of the German government. Of course the cause she served perpetuated a holocaust, the annihilation of a civilian population unprecedented in the history of the modern world.

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After the war, Riefenstahl claimed that she was just a filmmaker for hire and that she was primarily interested in the aesthetics, not politics, of the new Nazi regime. Neither argument seems to hold up against the historical evidence of her complicity, and her motives may not matter much when we factor the considerable success of her imagery to rouse the populace to such hideous ends.

Reifenstahl's visual style was unusual for a documentary filmmaker; unlike her American and British counterparts who worked with fairly tight budgets, she was funded lavishly and thus was able to shoot with multiple cameras. Her films took shape in the editing room, where she had the luxury of choosing shots from a number of camera angles and distances to find one that best suited her argument. In *Triumph of the Will*, she used low-angle close-ups to glorify individuals (Hitler, of course, and other ranking Nazis) and high-angle long shots to dramatize the unity and power of the crowd (fig. **8.14**).

Riefenstahl's use of sound was more conventional. She used diegetic sound sparingly (mostly for the Nazi speeches at the political rally). For the most part she resorted to nondiegetic and nonsynchronous sound. Most prominent was a bombastic, martial, orchestral score that she used much as such music might be used to underscore a dramatic feature. The music lent gravitas to the visual display of Nazi iconography: the banners, the military procession, the architecture.

8-1d Direct Cinema

The **direct cinema** movement that took shape in the United States in the early 1960s was built on technological advances in lightweight cameras and portable sound equipment and the sudden significance in American popular culture of televised news and nonfiction television. Footage picked up by mobile film crews transported viewers to the news. Direct cinema filmmakers used the mobile equipment and exploited this new TV reporting sensibility to move away from the dated romantic realism of Flaherty and his pictorial tableaus and the dull maps, charts, talking heads, and voice-of-God narration of the war-era films. The documentary filmmakers in the direct cinema movement—Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin, and Frederick Wiseman—placed themselves and the viewer in the space of the action. The images were captured as they occurred by a seemingly

direct cinema A documentary movement in the United States in which the camera acts as an objective, disinterested observer, capturing events as they unfold.

8.12 The face of the Nazi leader rendered in low-angle to imply authority and gravitas in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

8.13 The faces of Germany's future: portraiture as persuasion in *Triumph of the Will*.

8.14 The adoring crowd in *Triumph of the Will*.

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8.15–8.17 The camera pans the audience at a Bible sales conference, catching its subjects unawares. *Salesman* (David and Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1968).

objective witness to the events on screen. And all of the sound was diegetic and recorded "wild," or live.

Direct cinema was characteristically intimate, and the often out-of-focus, variable-focused, or rack-focused aesthetic implied real life captured as it unfolded. For example, David and Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin in their 1968 film *Salesman* filmed a meeting held for traveling Bible salesmen. A simple pan of the audience brings into focus two of the men in whose lives we are most interested (figs. **8.15–8.17**). The pan is fairly quick, and the focus is meant to appear not only variable (highlighting key characters, obscuring others) but also rushed; these are events the camera operator must capture on the fly, with necessary adjustments in focus as we go from character to character, and from one part of the room (and distance from the camera) to another.

The direct cinema filmmakers used techniques that implied a purity and objectivity to present an unmediated event. Long takes let reality unfold before the camera; the live sound is often muddied by crowd noise or footsteps or a car driving by. Absent are techniques tied to commentary (e.g., title cards, voice-of-God narration, interviews, or talking heads).

Despite such a commitment to objectivity, in direct cinema filmmakers occasionally develop a relationship with their subject(s) and even enter into conversation with them. In *Grey Gardens*, for example, Little Edie dresses up and flirts with David Maysles; she performs musical numbers in costume especially for him. At one point in the film we see David Maysles behind the camera in a reflection in a mirror (fig. **8.18**). Maysles affirms his presence in the lives of his subject. This is not a mistake; after all, it could easily have been edited

8.18 David Maysles behind the camera in *Grey Gardens* (David and Albert Maysles, Ellen Hovde, and Muffie Meyer, 1976).

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out of the film. Instead it makes a statement about the transparency of his filmmaking process.

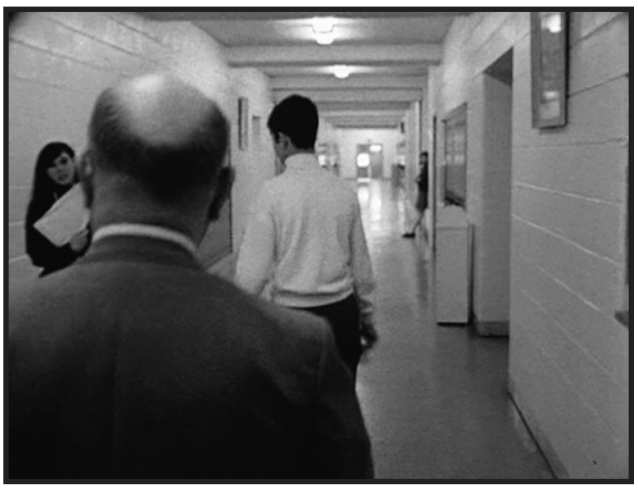
Perhaps the most extreme or austere version of direct cinema is evident in the films of Frederick Wiseman, whose work seems steadfastly objective, with no suggestion of performance or commentary. Wiseman's focus is on American institutions: *High School* (1967), *Hospital* (1970), *Basic Training* (1971), *Juvenile Court* (1973), and *Welfare* (1975); industries and occupations: *Meat* (1976), *Model* (1980), and *Ballet* (1995); and interesting places: *Canal Zone* (1977), *Racetrack* (1985), and *Zoo* (1993). His methodology is fairly simple: he stays with his subjects for weeks, shooting reel after reel of film. The goal is unmediated reality recorded in moments when his subjects finally forget they are on camera (which is always there, always running). The finished film, then, is very much the product of careful editing, assembled from the thousands of feet of exposed film into a document of a certain place and time.

For his 1967 feature *High School*, Wiseman (who records the sound) and Richard Leiterman (the camera operator) went to Northeast High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and used a "fly-on-the-wall" approach to present a typical day at an American school. The film begins with the drive to school as we listen to the car radio and the Otis Redding song "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay"—notably a song about boredom and "wastin' time"—and climaxes with a faculty meeting after the final bell. The "fly-on-the-wall camera" epitomizes the conventions of direct cinema: variable focus (suggesting images captured just as they happen) and awkward framing (images rendered from less-than-ideal camera positions, again suggesting the camera operator's attempt to "keep up").

The classroom scenes that compose the majority of the film present a stultifying world of endless, mindless repetition. We visit a foreign language class in which students repeat phrases they don't understand. Later the camera surreptitiously watches from the back of the gym as some girls dance to a routine following the basic commands elaborated in the pop song "Simple Simon Says" by the 1910 Fruitgum Company (fig. **8.19**). A teacher spends his lunch hour patrolling the hallways, and when he spies a student on the pay telephone, he tells him to hang up; he's not interested in why the student is on the phone or to whom he is speaking. The student simply shouldn't be in the hallway because it's against the rules (fig. **8.20**).

Rules in high school exist to be mindlessly followed. And conformity is a goal, one openly celebrated at the end of the day and at the end of the film, as we see

8.19 Simple Simon Says . . . The "fly-on-the-wall" camera is a witness to the incessant model of repetition characteristic of a system that rewards obedience at all costs. *High School* (Frederick Wiseman, 1968).



8.20 A teacher in search of students without hall passes. This all-too-familiar scene is just one of many in the film that reveals just how much the teachers and administrators have invested in pointless rules.

a teacher reading from a letter written by a soldier in Vietnam, a former Northeast High School student about to embark on a suicide mission. The letter concludes: "I am only a body doing a job." The teacher looks up from the letter and, captured in a low-angle close-up, says proudly: "Now when you get a letter like this, to me it means that we are very successful at Northeast High School" (fig. **8.21**). Absent narration and apparent authorial commentary, the implication is nonetheless clear: the teacher fails to appreciate what Wiseman and the filmgoer by this point understand: that it's fundamentally horrifying that "bodies doing a job" are what the school endeavors to make of their students.

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8.21 Audiences in 1968 (when *High School* was released) were no doubt split in their reaction when this teacher read a letter from a recent graduate stationed in Vietnam. The young man writes that he's "just a body doing a job." The teacher proclaims this proof "that we are very successful here at Northeast High School."

8-1e Subjective, or First-Person, Documentary

Though many direct cinema documentaries had an underlying political message and the filmmakers themselves often ended up making a political argument (e.g., Wiseman's chilling conclusion to *High School* affirming the teachers' success in dehumanizing students), a seeming objectivity characterized the movement. This claim to objectivity was challenged first by magazine writers. These so-called New Journalists—Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe—questioned the notion that real events can ever be captured with third-person objectivity and opted instead for a more straightforward first-person subjectivity; they placed themselves in the story and made clear from the start their points of view.

Many contemporary documentary filmmakers have adopted the New Journalism style. These films are built upon a fundamental subjectivity; the authors appear in the films, they freely comment upon what they find (and what we see and hear), and they often stage scenes, especially confrontations, that put people on the spot.

Two of the best-known filmmakers to use this overtly subjective technique are Nick Broomfield, who with Joan Churchill directed *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003) and Michael Moore (*Roger and Me*, 1998; *Bowling for Columbine*, fig. **8.22**; and *Sicko*, 2007). As on-screen characters and commentators, these filmmakers openly interact and comment upon the scenes as we witness them together. The effect is seductive because the directors speak directly to us about images we see at the same time as they do.

In *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, the documentary filmmakers Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill question the legitimacy of sentencing to death the serial killer Aileen Wuornos, shown in figures **8.23** and **8.24** in her last interview with Broomfield. Throughout the scene she addresses "Nick" directly and finally tears off her microphone in frustration and confusion. Because of Churchill's handheld, first–person camera work and Broomfield's on-screen "performance," we tend to read the film in concert with their point of view. The scene leaves little doubt that Wuornos is insane. So how, the filmmakers ask us here, can a civilized society justify her execution?

Michael Moore never pretends to be "fair and balanced." And in refusing to hide behind an impersonal impartiality, he, like Broomfield and Churchill, is on a very basic level telling the truth about his politics and his goals for his films. In *Roger and Me* (figs. **8.25** and **8.26**), for example, Moore crashes a General Motors stockholder meeting. We hear Moore first in voice-over, much like a fictional character in a fiction film, setting the scene: "It was time to confront Roger Smith face to face." Then we see GM chairman Roger Smith, the

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8.22 Agitprop: Michael Moore, documentary filmmaker and political activist, in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

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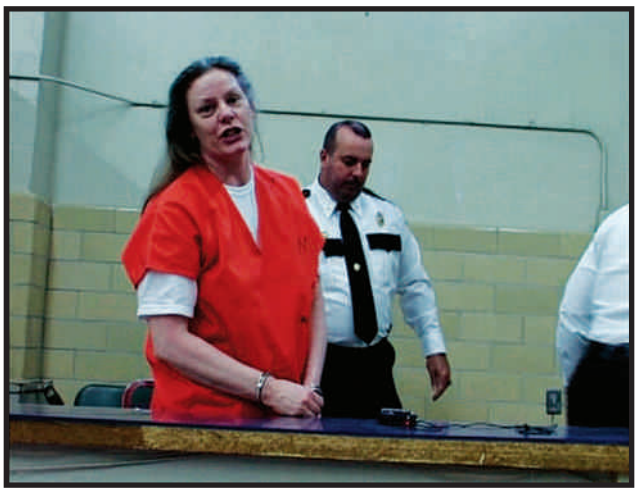
8.23 The documentary filmmakers Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill question the legitimacy of sentencing to death the serial killer Aileen Wuornos, shown here in her last interview with Broomfield. *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003).



8.24 Wuornos asks a guard to take off her microphone after she takes out her frustration on Broomfield, whose sympathetic narration has throughout challenged our assumptions about Wuornos's culpability. The reference to the microphone allows Broomfield and Churchill to show the audience the sound technology they used to mediate this live event.

target of Moore's ire, from a distance roughly matching the distance between Smith and Moore in the hall. We then cut to a shot of Moore, poorly lit in the crowd (after all this is a documentary, not a professionally lit fictional scene) preparing to pose a question, only to have Smith move to adjourn the meeting. The scene reveals Smith's reluctance to speak to Moore, which, since we move through the film "with" Moore, frustrates us as much as it frustrates the filmmaker.

8.25 Roger Smith, chairman of General Motors, delivers his Christmas message. *Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989).

8.26 Intercut with Smith's speech is a harrowing scene of a former GM employee's family being thrown out of their house.

We later see Smith's annual Christmas message, which ends as the chairman reads from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. "I have always thought of Christmas as a good time . . ." (fig. **8.25**). We then cut to the family of a recently laid-off GM worker getting tossed out of their home (fig. **8.26**). We hear a mix of diegetic sound (the mother shouting at her kids to get their coats on—they're being tossed out on a cold Michigan winter's day) mixed evenly via a sound bridge with extra-diegetic sound (Smith's speech, reading still from Dickens, touting: "a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time").

Taking this first-person documentary format even further, Morgan Spurlock, in *Super-Size Me* (2004), investigates the health risks of eating too much fast

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8.27 The filmmaker Kirby Dick (right) unsuccessfully negotiates an alternative to an NC-17 rating for his documentary about the motion picture rating system, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006). On the other end of the phone line is Classification and Rating Administration chairwoman Joan Graves, depicted in an animated facsimile.

food by eating too much fast food. Like Moore, Spurlock is both a documentary filmmaker and a comic provocateur. The film may well be all about Spurlock first and foremost, but the stunt proves an effective mode of telling the story he wants to tell: if you eat too much fast food, you'll get sick.

Broomfield, Moore, and Spurlock seem to relish their face time on camera. Other contemporary documentary filmmakers enter the space of their films only when the story they tell finally includes them. For example, in *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006), the director Kirby Dick mostly stays at the periphery. But as he readies for distribution his exposé of the MPAA movie rating system, the film gets saddled with an NC-17 rating. When he tries to appeal the decision, he is stonewalled by Joan Graves (the chairwoman of the Classification and Rating Administration, or CARA), in a conversation that one really needs to see and hear to believe. Dick films and records the conversation and at that moment becomes the subject of his own documentary (fig. **8.27**). Here Dick shares with Broomfield, Moore, and Spurlock a basic truth claim, a transparency with regard to his point of view.

By affirming a subjective point of view, by making no claim to objectivity, and by going so far as to imply that objectivity is impossible, these filmmakers ably frame their work as a real or live event that has cried out for commentary, an event about which the filmmakers simply cannot keep their mouths shut. As we ponder the truth claims made by these subjective documentaries, we are brought back to the two defining characteristics of documentary moviemaking: (1) the way the film is presented to audiences (how it is identified or defined as a documentary by its makers) and (2) the consequent expectations audiences bring to the screening of the film (that the film they are about to see is a documentary). Even though these films feature plenty of commentary and seem to develop the character of the filmmaker as completely and complexly as a fiction film might, the criteria are still met: the filmmakers present their work as documentaries, and audiences have come to expect and appreciate this approach as a more modern and more personal version of the venerable genre.

8-2 ANIMATION

Simulations of movement using pen-and-ink drawings—a form of moving picture animation and a direct antecedent to what we call (for a reason) "moving pictures"—dates to 1828, just four years after Paul Roget first described the phenomenon of "persistence of vision" (see chapter 1). These first experiments in animation used a crude motion toy called a Thaumatrope, which is a simple device composed of a disk attached to a pole with a string (so the disk could be twirled). Each side of the disk contained an illustration: for example, a bird on one side, a cage on the other (fig. **8.28**). Twirling the disk merged the two illustrations so the bird appeared to be in the cage. When these still images were transferred to glass plates, and the pole and string abandoned in favor of a larger, sturdier motion toy, audiences got their first glance at multiple, continuous, projected moving images.

We have come a long way from these crude demonstrations of the persistence of vision. Cine-animation began with hand-crafted, pen-and-ink drawings, then moved on to illustrations on transparent celluloid strips produced by studio teams and then photographed by a camera designed to produce a single image from multiple

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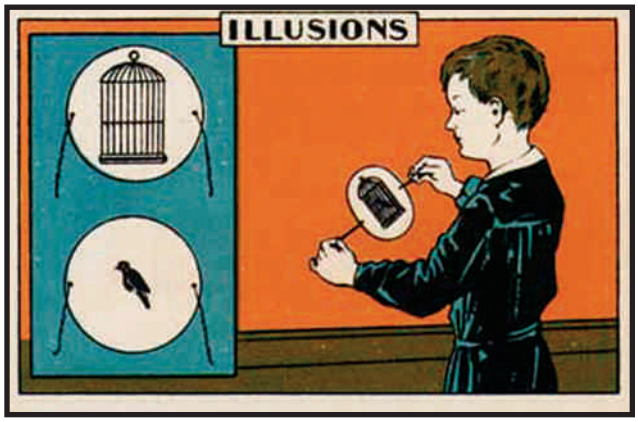

An illustration of a thaumatrope, © Bright Bytes Studio

8.28 An illustration of a Thaumatrope, an early motion toy. One side of the card is a cage; the other, a bird. If you make the images move fast enough, the bird appears to be in the cage.

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8.29 Pen-and-ink animation by J. Stuart Blackton, circa 1905.

8.30 Modern computer animation: *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995).

layers, to stop-motion figure manipulation, and most recently to computer modeling and imaging captured in 3-D. The history of animation is at once a matter of technological development and creative enterprise; it is tied as much to evolving techniques and industrial innovation as it is to creative impulse and imagination. Then and now our appreciation of animated movies has depended upon the gee-whiz factor—a marveling at the technology and techniques that made the work possible. So, whether we are talking about the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "lightning drawings" made by J. Stuart Blackton (showcased first via magic lantern and then on film, fig. **8.29**) or a modern computer-animated feature like *Toy Story* (fig. **8.30**), animation is meant at once to entertain and astonish.

The following section is a selective survey of cine-animation from the comic-strip style of Winsor McCay and Otto Messmer, through the landmark early work at the Walt Disney and Warner Bros. studios, to modern stop-motion and computer-animated features. The goal here is to begin to understand and appreciate animation as a significant mode of cinematic art.

8-2a Early Animation

In the 1910s Winsor McCay touted himself as the world's greatest cartoonist. Though such a title is subject to debate, McCay, a newspaper cartoonist for the *New York Herald*, was at the time the most world's best-known film animator, ably adapting the style of multiframe print comic strips to multiframe filmed animation. His films featured pen-and-ink line-drawn caricatures, thought, and dialogue bubbles, and an emphasis on a single gag or stunt as opposed to a developed storyline.

McCay adapted his comic strip character, Little Nemo, in *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics* (AKA *Little Nemo*, fig. **8.31**). The short begins with an affirmation of process and its complexity and difficulty; before we get to the cartoon, we watch live-action footage of McCay drawing his characters, as a title card tells us that 4,000 drawings went into the production of the 2-minute animated film. From the start, the appeal of animation regarded the wonder of its own creation. Unlike live-action, which often endeavors to conceal the process of its production, with animation we are meant to appreciate the creators as well as the creation. Indeed, the first drawing in

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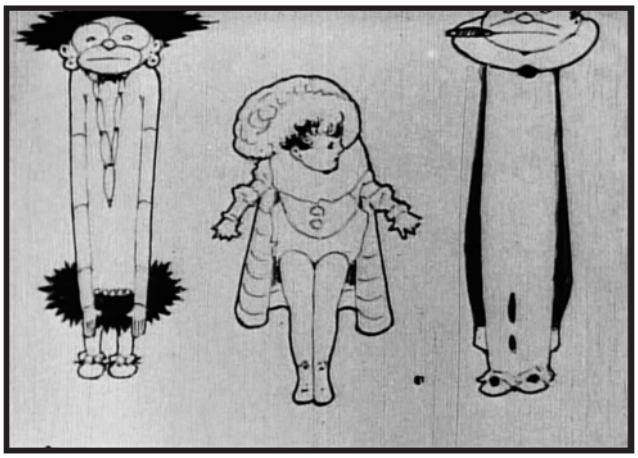
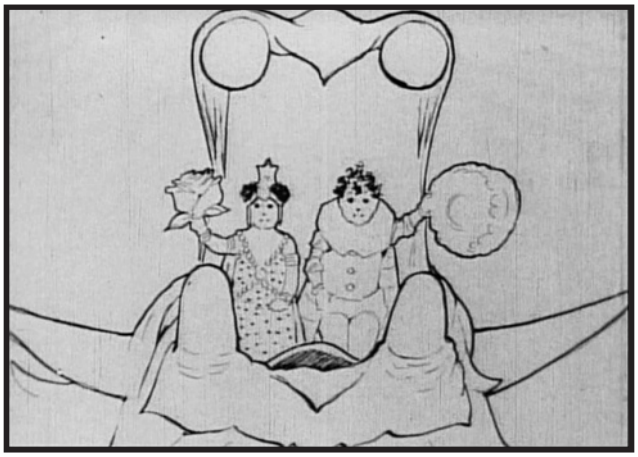
8.31 A simple pen-and-ink line-drawing and a simple request: "Watch me move." *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics* (AKA *Little Nemo*,1911).



8.32 The Coney Island (fun house) mirror gag.



8.33 Nemo and his princess exit in the jaws of a dragon drawn to look like a fixture on a carousel, though this dragon has teeth and it moves on its own.

McCay's first film asks the audience to appreciate the simplest of on-screen actions: "Watch me move."

McCay's characters move about against a flat, white background, a reminder that the image we see is a photograph of a two-dimensional drawing on paper. McCay focuses on simple visual gags, many of which became staples of future animation: the Coney Island mirror gag in which the characters are stretched lengthwise and widthwise in front of the fun house mirror (fig. **8.32**) and trippy mismatches of human characters and mythical creatures (the dragon that carries off Nemo and his princess at the end of the film, fig. **8.33**).

By the early 1920s, the Famous Players Lasky Corporation and Paramount Studios began distributing a new animated series featuring Felix the Cat, animated and produced by Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan (figs. **8.34–8.37**). The Felix the Cat cartoons look much like McCay's comic strip adaptations; we see the same decidedly two-dimensional, pen-and-ink drawings. The goal for Messmer and Sullivan was not a pictorial realism: the animals are **anthropomorphized** (Felix walks upright), the humans are mere caricatures, and objects and buildings often are labeled (the jam jar in fig. **8.36**; the gas works in fig. **8.37**) because they are mere sketches of the real thing.

8-2b The Wonderful World of Disney

Felix the Cat became an iconic film character, as familiar to American film audiences as the silent movie stars Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford. After almost ten years in the limelight, Felix was supplanted by another iconic cartoon figure, Mickey Mouse, created by the animators working for the producer Walt Disney. The film that made Mickey a star and Disney a household name was the innovative black-and-white sound cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928). In this early incarnation, Mickey is a lovable scamp, a crudely drawn character with funny short pants and oversized clown-like shoes. Though the drawn animation is still basically pen-and-ink, the Disney animators—the team of tracers and inkers and technicians that made the production of these cartoons possible—made the background more a part of the illustration and thus made the cartoons less like newspaper comic strips.

The addition of sound was the most telling innovation in *Steamboat Willie* and, to Disney's credit, it proved seamless from the start. Though it was not exactly synchronized—after all, cartoon characters

anthropomorphize To give human qualities to a nonhuman creature or object.

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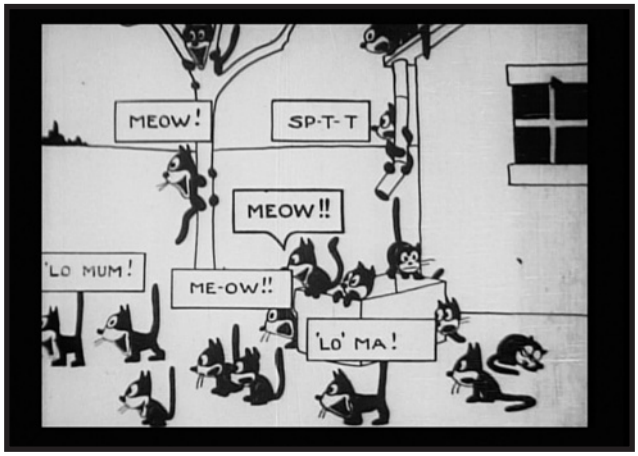
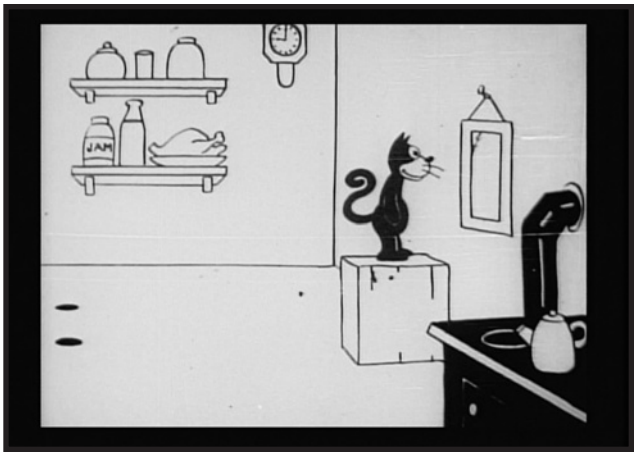
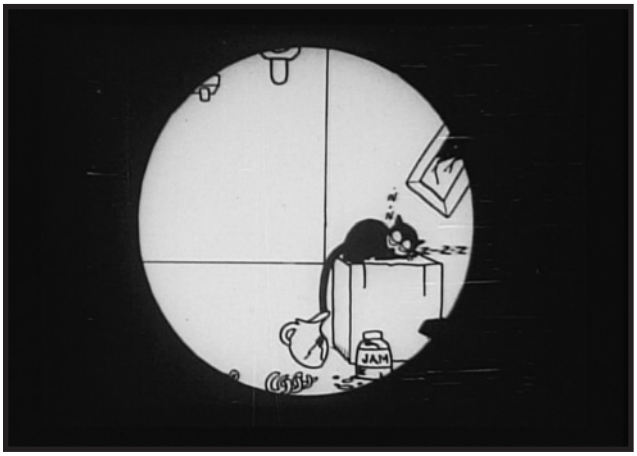


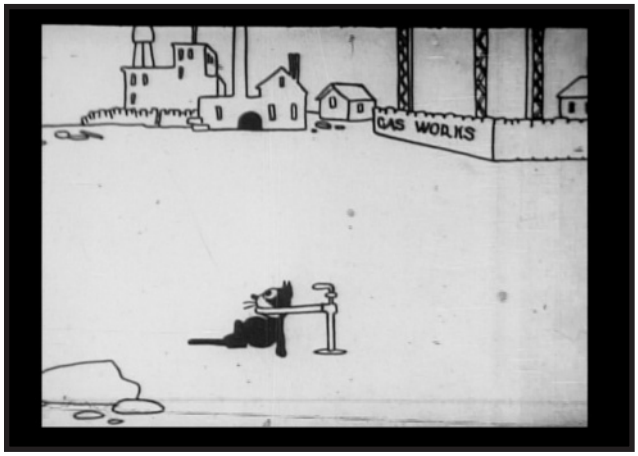
8.34 Comic strip–styled dialogue boxes in Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan's *Feline Follies* (1919).



8.36 Felix the anthropomorphized cat. *Feline Follies* (Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan, 1919). Note the pen-and-ink style and the label on the jam jar.



8.35 A deft mix of faux film technique (the iris shot suggested by the drawn image) and comic strip style (the Z-Z-Z suggesting sleep).



8.37 Felix switches on the gas and takes his life. Early cartoons were not made for children.

cannot actually whistle (fig. **8.38**) or play pots and pans as if they were musical instruments (fig. **8.40**)—it nonetheless functioned much as soundtrack music functioned in live-action films. The music underscored and commented upon actions on screen; the sound effects accompanied and at times exaggerated real-life sounds. Sometimes music and effects are combined; taking the transformation of objects so prominent in McCay's *Little Nemo* film (the dragon that becomes a coach) and in Messmer and Sullivan's *Feline Follies* (ink spots on the floor become holes out of which mice emerge) one step further, we see Mickey transform a farm animal into a wind-up record player (fig. **8.39**) and hear first the sound of the animal, then the sound of music.

Mickey proved to be a versatile character—a gaucho, a fireman, a pioneer, a football star—easily plugged into a scenario and setting. There were some cosmetic changes over the years: Mickey drawings are more rat-like in *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (fig. **8.41**); he gets his white gloves and more rounded features in *The Fire Fighters* (fig. **8.42**). But for the most part Mickey Mouse was a consistent comic persona who persisted through a variety of settings and scenarios for decades.

A look at the mise-en-scène, in this case the sets and scenes drawn by the Disney artists, reveals increasing attention to expressive if not fully realistic backgrounds: note the city in the distance in *The Fire Fighters* (fig. **8.42**). We are by this point in the history of animation fully free of the comic-strip style and moving towards narrative, or story, cartoons. The 1934 short *Gulliver Mickey*, for example, is a loose adaptation of Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century novel *Gulliver's Travels* (fig. **8.43**). The film banks on audience familiarity with the famous story and uses that narrative to frame a series of gags exploiting the

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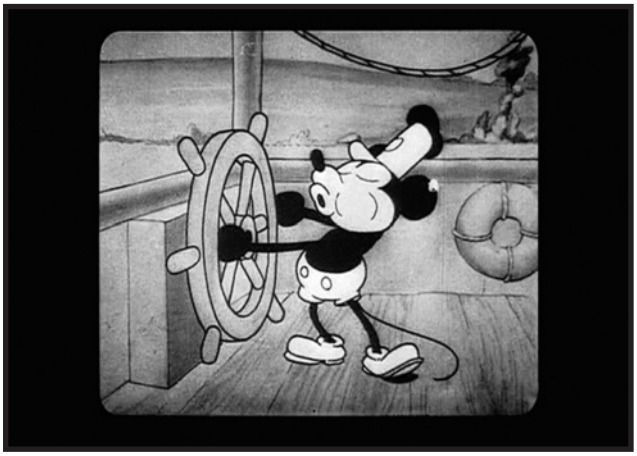
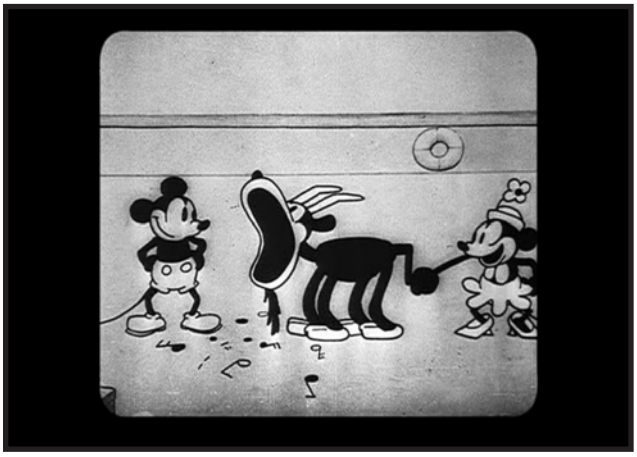
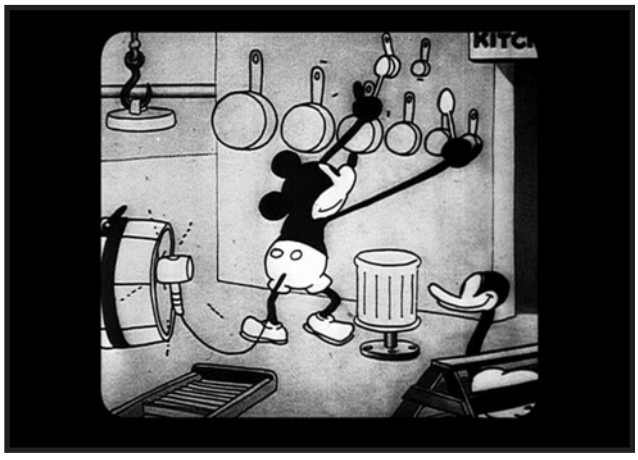
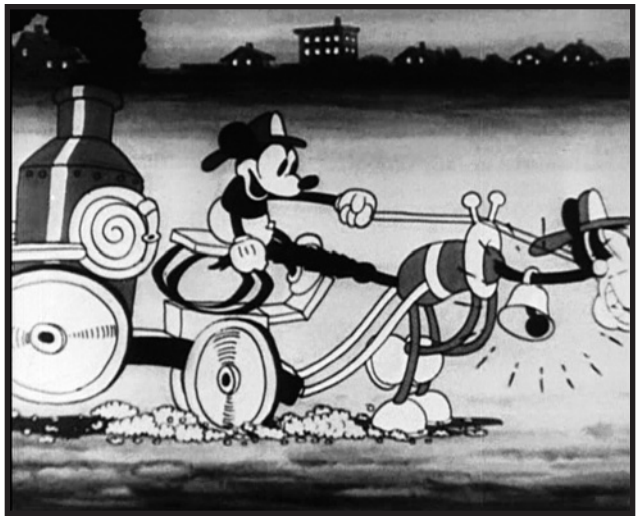


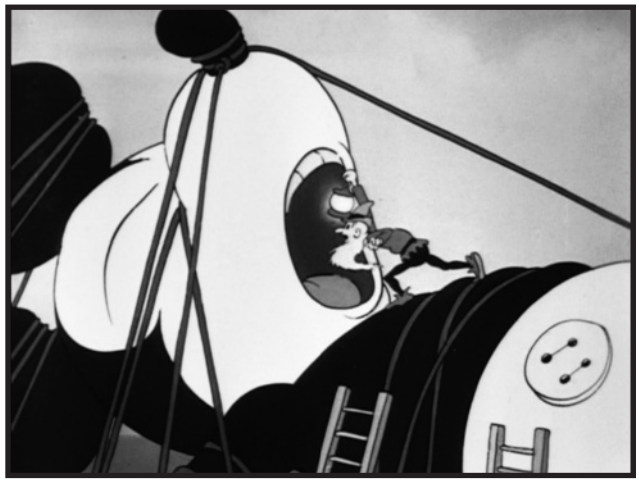




8.38–8.40 Walt Disney's breakthrough film, the sound cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928), starring Mickey and Minnie Mouse.



8.41 and 8.42 The ever versatile cartoon mouse: *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928) and *The Fire Fighters* (1930).



8.43 From comic strips to classics: Disney's move into narrative: *Gulliver Mickey* (1934).

comical notion of a giant Mickey Mouse, several times the size of the Lilliputians who torment him. Another film of the same year, *Two-Gun Mickey*, is a gentle parody of the movie western and melodrama and as such frames the gags in familiar narratives. Mickey's nemesis in the film is Peg-leg Pete, who kidnaps Minnie. Pete is twice Mickey's size, and his goal seems similar to that of the outsized

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8.44 Snow White and assorted friends from the forest whistle while they work. William Garity's new multiplane camera facilitated the painterly style of and depth-of-field image in Disney's first narrative feature-length cartoon. *Snow White* (1937).

8.45 In *Pinocchio* (1940) Disney animators were able to simulate cinematic mise-en-scène. Note the apparent lighting of the shot (the key, or spot, light on Pinocchio and the resulting shadow). Note also the apparent depth to the image, a boon to animators using the multiplane camera.

villains in movie melodramas: he has designs on Minnie that are unsavory. Things are solved much as they would be in a live-action western.

In 1937 drawn animation was revolutionized by William Garity's multiplane camera, a vertical photography device that allowed animators to layer glass plates and later celluloid strips (**cels**) to control separately as many as seven fields of vision at once for each shot. The multiplane camera improved upon the groundbreaking work on transparent cels and overlapping images designed and patented by John Randolph Bray and Earl Hurd dating as far back as 1915 and it made possible the more complex pictorial design and painterly look of Disney's first full-length narrative feature *Snow White* (fig. **8.44**). It enabled animators to control separately foreground and background and thus introduce depth to the cartoon image and simulate camera work, especially moving camera, as figures in the foreground appear to move through changing backgrounds.

The multiplane camera allowed for the increased division of labor necessary for the production of such long and complex animated films as *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* (fig. **8.45**). Much like live-action movies, the production of animated features involved a lot of people with particular expertise—animators drawing, tracing, coloring, and photographing the layered cels—working simultaneously or sequentially to create the finished product. It also streamlined production because only the aspects of the frame in motion had to be changed from frame to frame. Each layer need not be reproduced for every shot. This allowed for the more complex, deeply composed images to be more quickly produced and reproduced. Such a Fordist model (see chapter 7) was essential to the drawn animated feature.

Much like McCay, Messmer, and Sullivan, part of the attraction to Disney's animated films was the process of creation itself, the genius behind (and the Herculean task involved in) each movie's creation, development, and execution. Interestingly, this focus on the mode of production did not detract from the films' fundamental appeal to, as the circus ringmaster used to put it, "children of all ages." Disney (the Disney Studio) did the work, so we could sit back and have fun, a consistent formula for success for the enduring Disney entertainment empire.

cel A painting or drawing made on celluloid for use in an animated film.

8-2c Warner Bros.

An alternative to the Disney house style took shape at Warner Bros. in the 1930s, where animators stayed true to the gag-based, animated, short-subject formula, producing mostly character-based slapstick comedies featuring the likes of Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Daffy Duck, Wiley Coyote, and the Roadrunner. The animators—Friz Freleng (who began his career with Disney), Robert (Bob) Clampett, Tex Avery, and Charles (Chuck) Jones—created and exploited the anarchic, anything-goes spirit of the series' protagonists. The WB house style involved free play with

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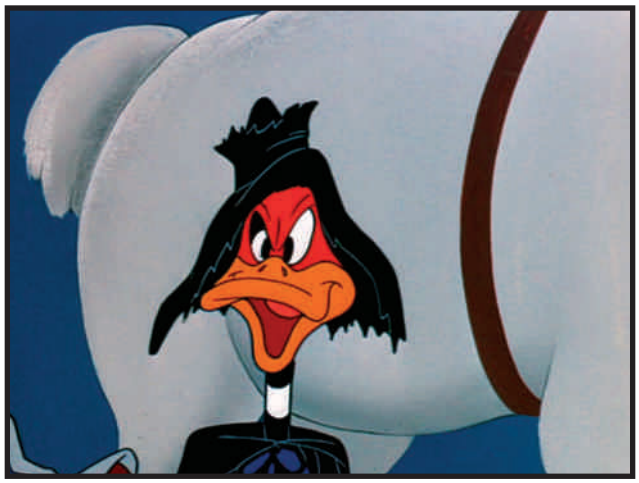
8.46 *Duck Dodgers in the 24 1/2th Century* (Chuck Jones, 1953).

8.47 The cartoons allowed Warner Bros. to elicit a laugh at their own expense, or at least at the expense of the movie business. As we hear Daffy Duck shouting "You're killing me!" to a movie executive, we see a cartoon drawing of the familiar Warner Bros. lot where, we gather, executives occasionally failed to appreciate the peculiar genius of its other, live, contract actors. *The Scarlet Pumpernickel* (Chuck Jones, 1950).



8.48 Daffy may be playing the swashbuckling Scarlet Pumpernickel, but he's still Daffy Duck and always game for a pratfall or two. *The Scarlet Pumpernickel* pokes fun at a studio system that did indeed typecast actors, though in the end even Daffy realizes he's best suited for the sorts of films the studio assigns him.

exaggeration—developing gags based on size and scale—and banked on the comedy antics of anthropomorphized, wisecracking animals. In the 6- to 8-minute short-subject format, the animators made good use of vivid color that showed off the Technicolor process, radio-style sound effects, the expert voice-work of Mel Blanc, punning wordplay on the dialogue track, and, to highlight the on-screen action, sped-up variations on classical music themes (supervised by Carl Stallings).

The key to WB's Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes cartoons were the "stars," who were so well developed and so familiar to audiences that simply plugging them into a scenario was enough to get the audience laughing. Take for example the irascible, ever-combative Daffy Duck, a comic persona with unbridled energy, a profound mischievous streak, and a characteristic lisp. Daffy was first introduced in 1937, and by the early 1940s he could be usefully moved from story to story, genre to genre, movie parody to movie parody. In *Duck Dodgers in the 24 1/2th Century*, for example, Daffy stands in for the movie serial sci-fi hero Buck Rogers and is moved freely through a lampoon of futuristic (and mostly bad sci-fi movie) special effects (fig. **8.46**).

The Scarlet Pumpernickel, a 1950 Chuck Jones parody of the popular film *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, casts Daffy first as a Warner Bros. character actor miffed at typecasting (as a daffy comic, of course) (fig. **8.47** and **8.48**). The cartoon opens as Daffy hawks a 2,000-page script to a Warner Bros. executive. As he begins reading, the script comes to life with Daffy in a dual role: English aristocrat by day, swashbuckler by night. He is joined by a who's who from the Warner Bros. (cartoon) stable of stars: Porky Pig, Sylvester, and Elmer Fudd. The cartoon ably spoofs swashbuckler films, actors who take themselves too seriously, and the random big finish of so many commercial movies of the era. When Daffy discovers that his 2,000-page script has no ending, he ad-libs a flood, a volcanic eruption, and runaway inflation in which a single kreplach, a Jewish dumpling, sells for $1,000.

The filmmaking process is again a source of laughs in the wildly creative *Duck Amuck*, in which Daffy is

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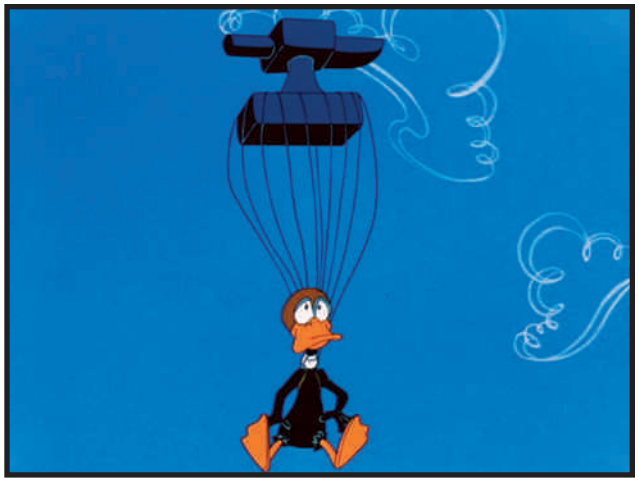

8.49 Here the mysterious animator erases Daffy's parachute and draws in its place an anvil. In a clever way, *Duck Amuck* (Chuck Jones, 1953) is very much about its own fabrication.

pushed to the limit of his already limited patience by an unknown animator, who keeps recasting (drawing new and erasing old) scenarios into which Daffy must adapt (fig. **8.49**). The backdrops still betray a hand-drawn and painted aesthetic, but Jones creates a fluid and colorful visual style to match the speedy, anarchic flow of images and sounds. *Duck Amuck* simulates cinematic technique, as the entire film appears to be a single shot; we see Daffy in the foreground moving into and out of a series of changing backdrops. The distinction between foreground (Daffy) and background (drawn by the animator character) also subtly alludes to the multiplane camera used to produce the cartoons of that era.

The cartoon has the prototypical kick-in-the-pants ending characteristic of the silent film comedy. Beleaguered at the end of the cartoon short, Daffy finally demands to know "who is responsible for this?" at which point Bugs Bunny reveals himself, mugging for the camera and pondering rhetorically: "Ain't I a stinker?"

8-2d Contemporary Animation

Most contemporary animation is computer generated and can be traced to image-processing technologies developed initially for the medical and mining industries. Early computer animation was first screened at trade shows to showcase new software. Commercial exhibition was a lucky afterthought.

To appreciate the work of these early computer animators, a little perspective: the average smartphone in 2011 is 100 times as fast as the computers animators worked with in the mid-1980s. Part of the gee-whiz factor, then—and this recalls the 1911 audience's response to McCay's early hand-drawn cartoons—involved a marveling at the dedication and effort involved in the work's creation.

At Pixar, the company that pioneered and has since become the forerunner in computer animation, the project begins with a gag and later a story. Then a rough series of images are worked out on paper. Rough sound (voice-work, effects, music) is then added. Modelers then get to work on the characters while the layout department works out the essential task of making the characters move. At the same time, the art department goes to work on the backgrounds, much as the art department in a live-action film designs and builds sets. The sound work then begins again to better fit the more polished images and scenes. When this later stage of sound and image is complete, "lighting" effects are added to better simulate live-action cinema. Then the rendering process begins. There are some single frames—and remember that a projected film runs at 24 frames per second—that are so packed with "information" they take a full 40 hours to render. Finally, once the image track is fully formed, the sound mix is polished and completed. The process is arduous and painfully slow; the average production time allotted for a Pixar feature is about four years. That part of its appeal is a marveling at the process of its production is certainly well placed.

Early Pixar films, like the Oscar winning *Tin Toy* (John Lasseter and William Reeves, 1988), were composed of rudimentary wire-framed shapes: circles,

8.50 All of the birds are rendered from identical, tear-shaped wire frames, but the animator Ralph Eggleston nonetheless gives them unique identities through subtle facial gestures. *For the Birds* (2000).

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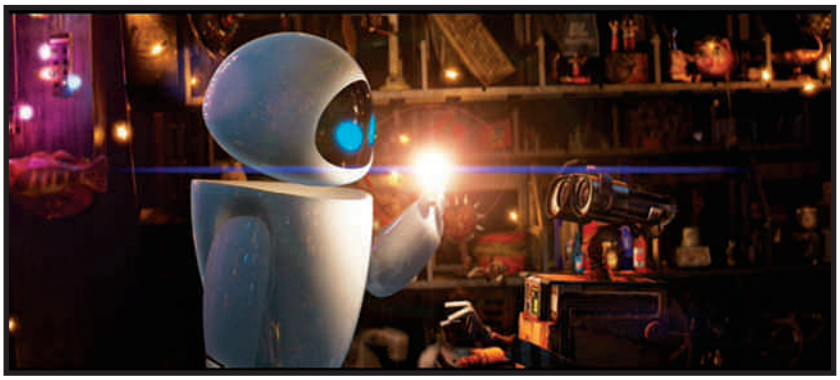

8.51 With *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008), Pixar seamlessly merged the silent-movie, gag structure of the shorts with the story structure of the features. The peculiar genius here is again found in the details, as the animators not only make Wall-E move, they give the robot character: emotions, desires, and so on.

8.52 A puppet fabricated to look like North Korean leader Kim-Jong Il in Trey Parker's low-tech "supermarionation" cartoon *Team America: World Police* (2004).

teardrops, and parallelograms. For a later short film, *For the Birds* (fig. **8.50**), the repetition of simple shapes and a simple gag structure suffices. We see a group of birds rest on a wire. A big, goofy bird wants to join them. They resist, and, as they wrest the big bird from their midst, they slingshot themselves skyward, returning to the earth featherless and quite embarrassed. What is most notable about this single-gag cartoon is the realistic and subtle expressions on the anthropomorphized birds' faces. Absent dialogue, we read the short film like a silent four-reel comedy: bodies in motion in a simple gag composed of setup, execution, and postmortem. The joke structure is enhanced by telling reaction shots.

The move into feature-length Pixar animated films with *Toy Story* in 1995 (see fig. **8.30**) brought with it a move away from the gag structure of the shorts and towards the telling of a more coherent story. The animation itself looked fundamentally different from the hand-drawn caricatures that had dominated animation for half a century; the figures were all more lifelike, their movements more fluid, the match-up of foreground and background less distinct and more seamlessly integrated.

Toy Story was a huge hit at the box office and Pixar has gone on to average a feature every eighteen months. As we read these films (*Toy Story* and the other Pixar features such as *Monsters, Inc*. (Pete Docter, David Silverman, and Lee Unkrich, 2001), *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, 2001), and *Wall-E*, fig. **8.51**, that followed), many of the same critical concepts we use to read live-action films come into play: there is a narrative organized into three acts, often structured around complex characters (or at least characters with complex emotions); there is a discernible mise-en-scène with simulated sets and simulated lighting effects; camera work is simulated (as opposed to mechanically performed), but we can nonetheless interpret the way images are framed and focused; editing is by and large a similar process to live-action, and again continuity is a key; and finally sound rounds out the process as voice-work is mixed with sound effects and music.

While Pixar prides itself on cleanly rendered images, other contemporary animators have produced a rough and raw alternative, sporting an undisciplined look meant to match counterculture content. Pixar films, consistent with the Disney image, are made for children and the child in all of us. The animated films made by Trey Parker (the clunky cutouts used in *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, 1999; and the puppets used for *Team America: World Police*, fig. **8.52**) and Mike Judge (the crudely drawn, comic-book style illustrations used in *Beavis and Butthead Do America*, fig. **8.53**), for example, are made for young adult and adult filmgoers acquainted with a junky, TV-cartoon style. These cartoons have decidedly adult content ranging from outrageous political commentary to off-color jokes about sex.

Many contemporary animated films are created by the subtle manipulation of three-dimensional objects captured frame by frame in what animators call

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stop-motion. Animators working in the stop-motion genre use a variety of materials, including molded clay (Will Vinton's *Closed Mondays*, 1974, and Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit* series), and **found objects** like ice-cream sticks, pipe cleaners, buttons, ball bearings, gears from toy motors, speaker wire, and random pieces of fabric (Henry Selick's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, fig. **8.54**, and his 3-D stop-motion feature *Coraline*, 2009). The appeal of these films seems again tied to the creative genius that produced the work—the animators who transform these objects into characters and then carefully pose these characters in the telling of a story.

The preproduction phase (storyboarding, design, and fabrication) of *Coraline*, for example, took 2 full years; the production phase, another 18 months. There are nearly thirty different models or puppets used in the film. Many took 3 to 4 months to produce. Add to this the painstaking process of posing the figures, assembling and serially tweaking the backgrounds frame by frame, to add up to a 96-minute film. The simple come-on in McCay's first cartoon—"Watch me move"—that signaled animation's gee-whiz appeal remains the key 100 years later.

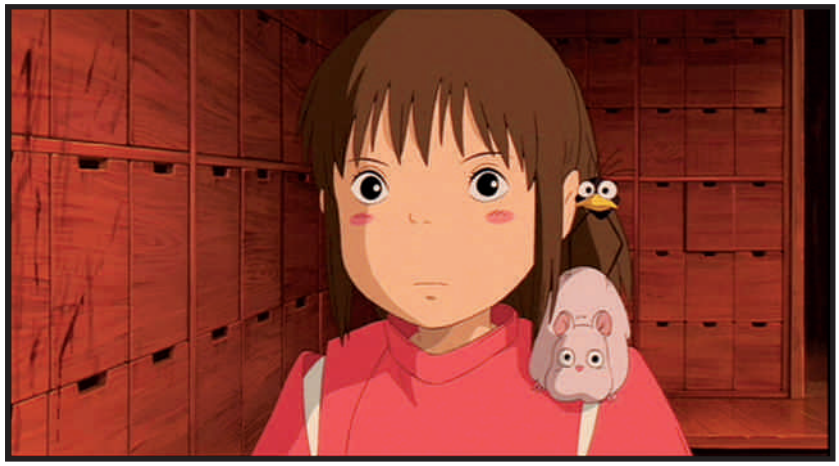
The film critic James Agee once remarked that animation was the one, true American art form. Film historians mostly follow Agee's lead and routinely focus predominantly if not exclusively on the American animated film. But animation does exist elsewhere; there were animated films in Russia produced as early as 1906. And especially since the time of Perestroika—the internationalization of the Soviet industry and the later breakup of the Soviet bloc—to

stop-motion A method of animation in which three-dimensional objects are moved and photographed for each frame.

found objects Everyday objects that are repurposed to create art.

8.53 The stoner caricatures Beavis and Butthead pose in front of a sign they no doubt find absolutely hilarious. The animator Mike Judge isn't interested in seamless or attractive rendering; instead his aesthetic fits the dim-witted worldview of the title characters. *Beavis and Butthead Do America* (1996).

8.54 Henry Selick's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), produced by Tim Burton.



8.55 Hayao Miyazake's *Spirited Away* (2001) showcases the animator's painterly, multiplane images.

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today, a rich and varied and often experimental cine-animation has emerged, including work in traditional pen-and-ink, stop-motion (with found objects and puppets), and etchings on glass plates.

The best-known contemporary animation outside the United States is in Japan, where stylized adaptations of Manga (young adult magazines and graphic novels, like Shirow Masumune's *Ghost in the Shell*, which was adapted into an animated feature by Mamoru Oshii in 1995), video games, and toys (the Pokemon phenomenon), as well as other pictorially distinct work have created what historians and critics and fans term **anime**. The most celebrated among the new Japanese animators is Hayao Miyazake, the founder of Studio Ghibli and the director of *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (which won an Oscar in 2002, the first animated film made outside the United States to do so; fig. **8.55**), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). In an era dominated by the digital image and computer-generated animation, Miyazake's films are a throwback to the painterly style of Disney features like *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*. But despite the reverence for and allusions to old-school hand-drawn and painted multiplane images, Miyazake's films retain the gee-whiz factor at the heart of animation's enduring appeal, in this case built upon audience appreciation for craft in an era otherwise dominated by mechanical or computer rendering.

8-3 EXPERIMENTAL FILM

Experimental and avant-garde filmmakers dramatically push at the boundaries of cinematic expression and in doing so challenge widely held notions of what movies can or should be. Their films are deliberately unorthodox, nonconformist, and difficult.

All of the elements of film form that we have examined in chapters 2 through 6 may be upended in experimental movies. In place of story, for example, we may find a tightly focused attention to the mysteries of anatomy (Willard Mass's *Geography of the Body*, 1943), or the unconscious workings of the human mind (Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, 1928), or the subconscious urges and anxieties of a seemingly desperate woman (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, fig. **8.56**). The point in these films is not to represent reality through narrative but to evoke the personal, the psychological, and the intimate through filmic images and sounds.

8.56 The theme of interiority—repression, loneliness, helplessness—captured in a single, soft-focus image: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, 1943).

Experimental films may be entirely **nonnarrative**, focusing on images and/or sounds in and of themselves. Some experimental filmmakers closely explore shapes and movement (fig. **8.57**). Others, like Stan Brakhage, play with the plastic material of film itself, painting directly on the film surface (*Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1981) or sandwiching natural detritus (leaves, dirt, a moth's wings) between strips of 16mm celluloid (fig. **8.58**).

When we watch experimental films, our attention is even more keenly focused on the constitutive elements of filmmaking: mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound. As we pay attention to how a particular film offers a new approach to these elements, we can begin to analyze how the film's experiments with form relate to its purpose, its effect, and, ultimately, its meaning.

8-3a Surrealism

Surrealism was a creative movement of the 1920s and early 1930s in literature, painting, sculpture, photography,

anime A style of Japanese animation that includes a range of styles and types including adaptations of Japanese Manga (young-adult magazines).

nonnarrative Structured by a focus on something other than story.

surrealism An avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century that explored the workings of the unconscious.

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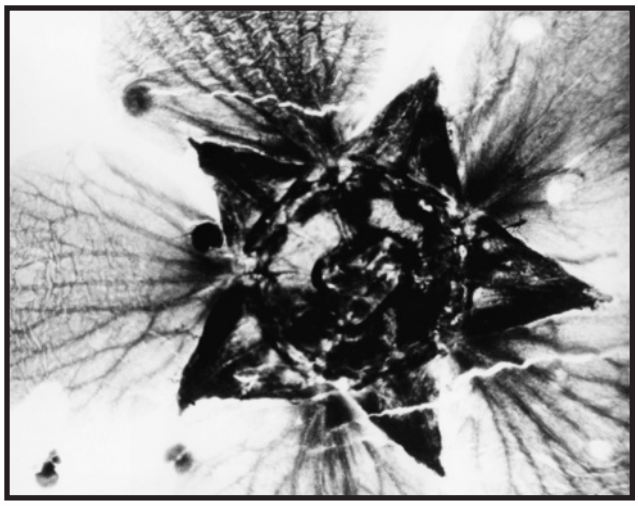
8.57 A striking image from Robert Florey's 1929 experimental short *Skyscraper Symphony*. A critical reading of the film would not involve tracking a story—there isn't one. Instead, the film's evocative camera work and composition creates an impression of the New York City skyline.



THE KOBAL COLLECTION

8.58 Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) merged collage with filmmaking and in doing so altered the very composition of the film itself. The effect is at once abstract and profoundly realistic, given that the film captures not a photographic representation of an object but the object itself.

and cinema that explored the illogical "narrative" of the dreamwork and its various meaningful and symbolic associations and images, drawing on ideas from Sigmund Freud. In order to highlight the unconscious or subconscious over the conscious realm, surrealists created and juxtaposed images and utterances devoid of reason, control, order, or moral preoccupation.

In their camera work and mise-en-scène, surrealist filmmakers experimented with such basic visual

8.59 An intimate encounter we must struggle to see, let alone understand, in *L'Etoile de Mer* (*The Starfish*, Man Ray, 1928).

elements as camera focus, makeup, and props, and created images that are deliberately obtuse or shocking. For example, in Man Ray's 1928 surrealist short *L'Etoile de Mer*, we follow a couple upstairs and watch a woman undress. Then the man leaves. It is a simple enough scenario complicated by Ray's visual style. We watch the encounter as if looking through a smoked-glass window. We struggle to see the image and struggle to understand its significance to a film composed entirely of indistinct images and a narrative that defies the logic and trajectory of coherent storytelling (fig. **8.59**). In *Emak-Bakia*, another Man Ray film that also includes scenes with misleading images, we see (clearly) a woman with unusually large eyes (fig. **8.60**). She then opens her eyes and in doing so reveals that what we first saw were eyes painted on her eyelids (fig. **8.61**). These surrealist experiments call attention to the act of seeing and movie artifice in a way that mainstream filmmakers of the period consciously avoided.

While mainstream cinema tells stories that have a cause-and-effect logic, surrealist cinema is by design and intent more random and absurd. The editing in surrealist films is often fascinatingly and frustratingly discontinuous: images follow one and another as a seeming matter of chance and circumstance. It manifests an associational form, in which there is a poetic as opposed to immediate or direct or logical connection between the images strung together in the editing room. In a particularly striking sequence in Man Ray's *Les Mystères du Château du Dé*, each image is beautifully set and shot, but despite a moving camera that seems to be taking us from one place to the next, the relationship between the images and the sets is associational and

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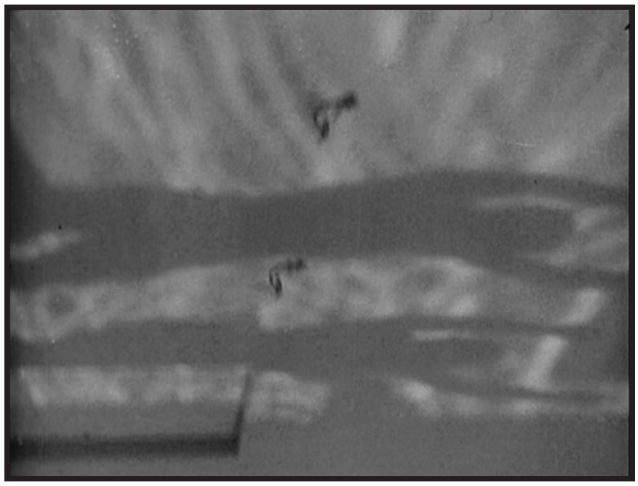
8.60 and 8.61 Two successive images in *Emak-Bakia* (Leave Me Alone, 1926). The first appears to show a woman with unusually large eyes. The second shows the woman opening her eyes, revealing that what we first saw were eyes painted on her eyelids.



8.62 and 8.63 Two successive shots from Man Ray's 1929 film *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (*The Mysteries of the Chateau of Dice*). A moving camera and the logic of editing suggest a connection between the two shots, but for Ray the logic is associational, poetic, and a matter of design and composition.

poetic. The camera movements and cuts seem solely aspects of design and composition; there is no apparent cause-and-effect narrative. The film is the record of one moment and then the next (figs. **8.62** and **8.63**). Meaning is fleeting and personal: as one might try to make sense of the run of images in a dream, the very form seems wide open to a variety of interpretations.

Surrealist visual artists like Ray and Salvador Dalí saw film as a medium that might enable them to build upon their more static work on paper and on canvas. Both turned to cinema because it was new and modern and industrial and largely derided by the high art establishment. Ray, Dalí, and the surrealist painter and conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp used cinema to efface the distinction between high art and commercial art. For example, in his 1926 short *Anemic Cinema* Duchamp juxtaposed images and slogans—a merging of high and commercial art that was already in play in his paintings and collages. *Anemic Cinema* is composed entirely of swirling shapes in constant movement. The spirals are intercut with revolving absurdist slogans like "If I give you a penny, will you give me a pair of scissors?" (figs. **8.64** and **8.65**).

In all of their visual artwork, the surrealists endeavored to undermine the larger, bourgeois notion of high art. For these artists, film proved to be an ideal modern medium because it was so clearly tied to industrialism and mechanical reproduction on the one hand and popular culture on the other. This savage satire of artistic pretension was nonetheless complicated by an

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8.64 and 8.65 Marcel Duchamp's film *Anemic Cinema* (*Anémic Cinéma*, 1926) links simple abstract shapes in movement with absurdist titles.

unavoidable aspect of experimentalism in art. Although these artists meant to speak to an audience that was suspicious of high art, their work was for the average filmgoer difficult, cerebral, even inaccessible. This was a final absurdity of the movement: that its very conceptual nature turned it into a kind of high art itself, limited to exhibition in galleries, museums, and other alternative venues.

8-3b The New York Underground

The term "new American cinema" is used most often today to refer to postclassical Hollywood, the period beginning with the industry-wide adoption of the Voluntary Motion Picture Rating System in 1968 and the advent of the seventies' auteur renaissance and culminating in the current multinational universe of blockbuster sequels and remakes. (We will return to these developments in the next chapter.) But in its initial incarnation, the **New American Cinema** referred to a group of New York–based avant-garde filmmakers—Lionel Rogosin, John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Alfred Leslie, and Robert Frank among others—who, along with Jonas Mekas, a journalist for the *Village Voice*, proffered an anti-Hollywood movie manifesto in which the filmmakers rejected the formal strategies and finance model of mass-market moviemaking. These filmmakers decried studio interference and industry censorship, rejected the big-budget, feature-length model, and in its place promised a modestly and independently financed, fully independent cinema composed of smaller, more personal movies distributed by a filmmakers' cooperative. Whatever profits this new cinema might produce, the filmmakers agreed to put into a fund to support the work of other struggling artists. With this alternative model, a New York film underground was born.

New American Cinema Group A group of avant-garde filmmakers whose anti-Hollywood manifesto was responsible for initiating the New York film underground of the 1960s.

The most famous filmmaker to emerge out of this group was John Cassavetes, a successful actor who used his money and connections to finance experimental films like *Shadows* (1959) and *Too Late Blues* (1961) and later independent films like *Faces* (1968), *A Woman under the Influence* (1974), and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976). Rather than focus on heroic, star-driven narratives, Cassavetes attended the struggles of everyday people and everyday life—husbands and wives, mostly—and found a new cinematic realism by slowing down the pace of scenes, allowing for scripted and unscripted dialogue and actions. The camera work has an improvisational feel as well, and the mise-en-scène is often so stripped down as to appear found rather than set and dressed. Even the lights seem to be oddly placed, as if we are watching a documentary captured live and on the fly. Cassavetes worked with an ensemble group of actors (Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, his wife Gena Rowlands) and freely mixed in amateurs (fig. **8.66**). As a result, there are a lot of clunky moments, lucky and unlucky accidents that Cassavetes left in the films. But just as often, he produced scenes so real they don't appear to be acted or scripted but instead emerge organically out of the interplay between the performers. Most Hollywood films try hard to mask artifice and to

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8.66 Cassavetes often mixed professional movie actors like Ben Gazzara (middle of the frame) with inexperienced, unprofessional amateurs to create a more organic feel to his films; the pace is slower and the interactions are at times awkward, even clunky. The overall effect is an alternative, experimental style. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976).

8.67 Dressed-down settings (the awful wallpaper, the "Apartment for Rent" sign on the wall), and a conspicuously misplaced lamp (that seems to screw up the lighting of the scene) introduced an alternative, experimental cine-realism.

correct imperfections in mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound. Cassavetes, true to his roots in the New American Cinema group, endeavored to create an anti-Hollywood, alternative, realist style (fig. **8.67**).

The roots of the New American Cinema style can be found in the New York City beatnik, or Beat, subculture, the increasingly public gay and lesbian subcultures, alternative theater, and Be-Bop jazz. Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* illustrates these influences. At first glance, the film appears to be little more than a home movie showing a handful of friends, albeit famous friends—Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso, and the jazz musician and painter Larry Rivers—hanging around a Bowery apartment (fig. **8.68**). The film is at once an invaluable historical document of a certain place and time and a nonnarrative "day-in-the-life" documentary. What makes the film so remarkable is not its content but its attitude—a snarky, playful cynicism elaborated in a commentary written and read by Beat writer Jack Kerouac. Like a lot of experimental films, *Pull My Daisy* includes only asynchronous sound: Kerouac's narration, in which he comments on and even voices the characters on screen; sound effects obviously added after the fact; and the postdubbed, impromptu jazz session. The film offers a free-form alternative to the classical Hollywood style in which image and sound, as well as live and postproduction sound, are fully and seamlessly integrated.

Just as *Pull My Daisy* presents a hip urban beatnik subculture, Jack Smith's outrageous *Flaming Creatures* focused on the then-closeted gay and lesbian world. Not only does the film feature on-screen homosexual acts—an absolute impossibility in a mainstream Hollywood movie in 1963—and a number of scenes in which the camera studies the faces of male transvestites, it also showcases a film style filled with camp images and iconography, images that at once celebrate and lampoon gay stereotypes (fig. **8.69**). *Flaming Creatures* makes no pretense to narrative or conventional characterization. Instead Smith offers overlong sequences of obviously simulated sexual action that are also absent motivation and narrative logic. These highly stylized moments of intervention and revelation challenge the strictly censored images of Hollywood cinema and offer glimpses into a subculture foreign to most filmgoers.

By far the most famous experimental filmmaker in New York in the 1960s was Andy Warhol, whose early films took the impromptu, slice-of-life formula to ridiculous lengths. The 5-hour film *Sleep* (1963), for example, showed John Giorno sleeping in real time, and *Empire* (fig. **8.70**) was composed of a single, stationary

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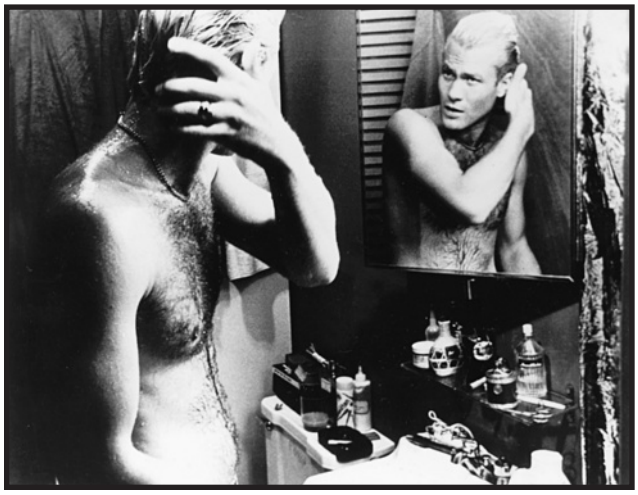
THE KOBAL COLLECTION

8.68 Three men on a couch. From left to right: the Beat poets Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, and Allen Ginsberg. *Pull My Daisy* (Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1959).

8.69 Jack Smith's camp experimental film *Flaming Creatures* (1963) ironically and theatrically exploited gay iconography and stereotypes. The film's graphic depiction of hetero- and homosexual sex offered a startling alternative to Hollywood films hamstrung by the commercial industry's regime of censorship.

8.70 Andy Warhol's 6-hour hyper-realist film *Empire* (1964).



THE KOBAL COLLECTION

8.71 Paul America in Andy Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965). Gay iconography dominates many of Warhol's experimental films.

camera focusing on the Empire State Building from 8:06 P.M. to 2:42 A.M. Warhol endeavored to upset the filmgoing experience. Per Warhol's suggestion, filmgoers might leave mid-film, have dinner and a walk, and then return without missing much of anything.

In the 1960s Warhol began ironically celebrating American celebrity culture, presiding over a coterie of the young and hip. These oddball celebrities—the transvestite Holly Woodlawn, the diva-esque Viva, gay studs like Paul America (fig. **8.71**), and the fashion model Edie Sedgwick—were famous mostly for being famous. Warhol's peculiar celebrities behaved outrageously, self-reflexively lampooning the essential narcissism of Hollywood celebrity culture. While Hollywood maintained the fiction that all of its movie stars were talented and thus deserved the privileges of stardom, Warhol's celebrities seemed content to be viewed as selfish brats with no apparent talent.

Among the most interesting directors on the post-Warhol, New York experimental scene is the photographer Richard Kern, who shoots explicit sadomasochistic fantasies that evince a powerful punk vibe (fig. **8.72**). These films (*The Right Side of My Brain*, 1984; *Manhattan Love Suicides*, 1985; and *Submit to Me Now*, 1987) are not for the timid or the prudish, and though they seem deliberately "dirty" in many

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8.72 A provocative image from Richard Kern's experimental film *X Is Y* (1990).

8.73 George Kuchar's garish, decidedly low-tech experimental film *The Fury of Frau Frankenstein* (2005).

senses of that word—unusual sex acts, grubby nonprofessional actors, dressed-down slum apartments—they are also oddly compelling. Kern's films are violent, sexist, and often disgusting and are by design shocking, even insulting. Such provocation is at the heart of experimental films in general, matching an aggressively unusual visual style and narrative structure to topics mainstream films dare not take on.

Experimental films anticipate an audience that is in on the joke, so to speak, which explains why a camp sensibility—the ironic celebration of bad taste (as well as bad acting, cheesy props and sets, and amateurish lighting)—is at the heart of a lot of the films. Both Smith and Warhol embraced camp wholeheartedly, as did their San Francisco counterpart George Kuchar. From his post at the San Francisco Art Institute, Kuchar, occasionally with his twin brother Mike, and occasionally with students from his classes at the Institute, produced wildly messy parodies like *The Naked and the Nude* (1957), *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966), *I, An Actress* (1977), and *The Fury of Frau Frankenstein* (fig. **8.73**). The films proudly celebrate a low-tech, bad-taste aesthetic: ugly sets, a garish use of color (costumes, filters, and processing); amateur actors overacting, delivering (and sometimes flubbing) comically hackneyed dialogue that is often poorly postdubbed and out of synch; and clunky special effects that look, and are, cheaply made.

8-3c Feminism and Experimentalism

Women have played a significant role in the history of experimental and avant-garde cinema. Underrepresented and marginalized in the mainstream industries in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, female filmmakers have created a sizeable and significant body of experimental work, finding an audience for movies that depart from mainstream style and content. Some of these filmmakers have set out to produce films with a **feminist** agenda, offering a range of unique perspectives on women's experiences in both the private and public spheres. Others have been key participants in alternative or avant-garde film movements embracing, like the men in these movements, an alternative cinematic form and style.

Among the most interesting people making movies during the silent era was the experimentalist Germaine Dulac. The director had ties to two avant-garde traditions: **impressionism** (which celebrated the essential poetry of moving images and at the same time resisted set narrative forms and formulas) and surrealism (discussed above). Her short film *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, released in 1926, was celebrated in avant-garde circles as an impressive contribution to both movements. Dulac satisfies the impressionist criteria with her poetic imagery and nonnarrative scheme, and she employs many of the techniques and preoccupations of the surrealist filmmakers, especially the attempt to find a visual language and narrative shape for unconscious and subconscious thoughts and dreams. *The Seashell and the Clergyman* evinces a fundamental irreverence characteristic of experimental

impressionism An avant-garde style that celebrated the poetry of moving images while resisting narrative forms and formulas.

feminist films Films that challenge gender inequality and/or assert female identity.

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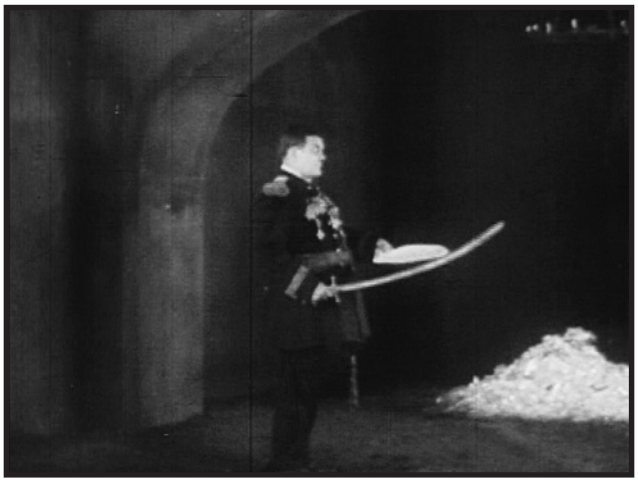
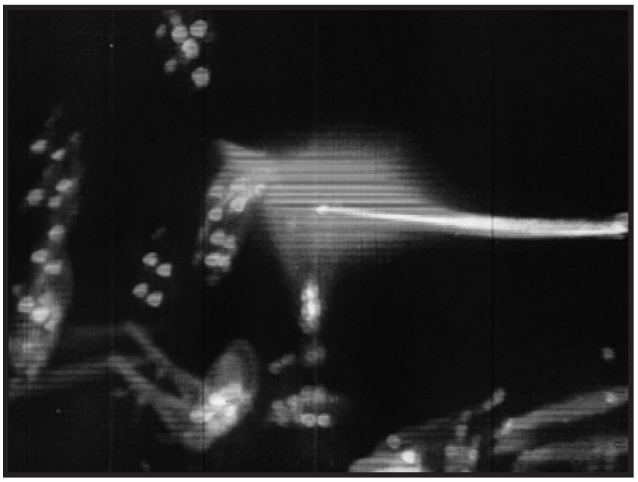
8.74 and 8.75 The priest cowers in shame then briefly realizes his fantasies by snatching off a parishioner's brassiere. *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (Germaine Dulac, 1926).





8.76 and 8.77 The general and his sword drawn and ready and held at an intentionally suggestive height. The sword glistens as it enters a space meant to suggest female genitalia.

film in general, in this case to the dominant religion in France at the time, Catholicism (figs. **8.74–8.77**). The story itself explores blasphemy and taboo as it presents through a series of transparently sexual images (swords, candelabra shaped like fallopian tubes) the erotic fantasies of a priest who holds improper feelings for a general's wife. And in its mocking depiction of both the priest and the general, it suggests a critique of patriarchy, and male-dominated institutions.

Among the feminist aspects of the film is its attention to how the male gaze objectifies women (a concept that would be articulated decades later in feminist theory). At one point we see the priest depicted in close-up, his face obscured except for his eyes. This image is meant to reveal the furtive nature of his gaze at the woman he desires; it implies an act of voyeurism. Then, as he gives in to his desires, we see him beckon the woman to the confessional and then strip off her brassiere. In a striking high-angle shot we see him twirl the brassiere in the air (fig. **8.75**). The undergarment appears to glow, a neat special effect harkening back to an earlier FX image of the general's sword glistening at its tip, and symbolic of its sexual charge (fig. **8.77**).

The imagery in *The Seashell and the Clergyman* follows a trajectory from shame and restraint to the priest's surrender to desire. But it otherwise does not have a discernible narrative arc, relying instead on mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and special effects to evoke a world of male fantasy and shame. The result is at once perplexing and powerful. When The British Board of Film Censors screened the film, they found it "apparently meaningless . . . if there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable." It is quite possible that Dulac appreciated their confusion

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and agreed with their larger assumption about its content.

Many of the women filmmakers who came after Dulac have used the marginalized discourses of experimental film to pointedly and politically explore women's issues from a feminist point of view. Among the best-known contemporary feminist experimental directors is Chantal Akerman, whose hyper-realist experimental films include *Hotel Monterey* (1972), *Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna* (1978), and most famously the 198-minute *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. The title of Ackerman's best-known film is composed of a woman's name and address, which is meant to summarize her life with the home she "makes."

Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles is often viewed as a work of "structural cinema" because of its static framing and long takes, its merging of feminist politics and anti-illusionist filmmaking techniques. The film tells the story of a housewife whose days are dominated by a stultifying routine (fig. **8.78**); things are always in their place and she treats everything—every action, including serial liaisons with clients with whom she sleeps for money—with a disturbing absence of affect and emotion. Akerman creates dramatic tension not through rising action but through subtle changes in the woman's routine. As we watch the film from a seemingly objective distance—Akerman eschews techniques like eyeline matches and reverse shots that place us in the world of the film—little things start to go wrong: dinner is overcooked; what to do with a dropped spoon confuses her. The film's length and its glacial pace are meant to give the filmgoer the experience of waiting for something to happen, an experience that certainly matches Jeanne's. When something finally does happen, when her final liaison with a male client stirs something inside her, something like feeling or emotion, she reacts violently; she grabs a pair of scissors and stabs him to death.

8.78 Chantal Akerman's hyper-realist *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) attends the maddening drudgery and ennui of a housewife's life. The film's glacial pace as the camera attends household tasks in real time is meant to frustrate the viewer much as the life she is leading frustrates the title character.

8.79 A deceptively simple image in Chantal Akerman's *Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna* (1978). One woman, two beds, and lots of time for the filmgoer to ponder the significance.

The principal character in Akerman's *Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna*, released three years later, is a successful filmmaker whose restlessness and rootlessness are exposed through the director's characteristic glacial pace and objective camera work. Anna's life is composed of a series of casual encounters of the social, professional, and sexual kind. Like the housewife in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, the filmmaker is at once independent and desperately lonely, a predicament exposed in carefully lit and staged tableaux (fig. **8.79**).

Akerman's films abound in the looks and sounds of ordinary things. Filmgoers have found this so-called **structural, or minimalist, cinema** alternatingly

structural or minimalist cinema Films characterized by static framing and long takes, that employ anti-illusionist filmmaking techniques.

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8.80 The romantic setup in Su Friedrich's 1991 film *First Comes Love*.

transfixing, hypnotic, mind-numbing, and (in and of itself) boring. What Akerman accomplishes is a match between real and filmed lives. We are meant to forget the camera and in doing so gain access to events that transpire as they might in real life and real time. The fundamental narrative techniques of elision and compression and the use of editing to supplant lengthy transitions are replaced here by careful attention to every gesture, every audible sound. We have ample time to linger over the images (the carefully composed and framed stationary camera shots) and to listen carefully to the sound of the room (the very thing sound engineers record to set the baseline for sound in a scene). In doing so, Akerman fundamentally alters the filmgoing experience, making it at once more realistic, more intimate, and less dramatic.

While Akerman's films offer a departure from the conventions of mainstream fiction, Leslie Thornton's films experiment with the conventions of documentary to create a radically different experience for audiences. In *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1983), for example, she merges ethnography, travelogue, talking-head commentary, and staged dramatizations to tell the story of Isabelle Eberhardt, a nineteenth-century European woman who traveled through North Africa masquerading as a man. Thornton compiles archival images that are both representational (the desert landscape Eberhardt traversed, for example) and metaphoric (the lunar landing, for example, to suggest the desert's strangeness to her European eyes) and then intercuts these images with dramatizations of Eberhardt's story played by different actresses and with interviews with contemporary women who also struggle with sexism. While the compilation of found footage, reenactments, and talking heads evince a familiar documentary format, Thornton's approach is nontraditional and difficult to fully grasp—a perfect match for her outsider heroine. Thornton's nontraditional take on the compilation form is also evident in *Another Worldly* (1999), a short film that juxtaposes old Hollywood dance footage with ritual performance by indigenous, "primitive" cultures all set to a modern techno-beat. The effect of these films is fragmented and fragmentary, part ethnography, part social commentary, part biography, part rumination on sexism.

Su Friedrich, another experimental feminist filmmaker, also uses documentary as a take-off point. In her 1991 film *First Comes Love*, we see a series of black-and-white images from four church weddings (fig. **8.80**). On the soundtrack we hear asynchronous, nondiegetic pop music, which serves to highlight the sweet, romantic images on screen. The payoff comes at the end of the film as Friedrich's otherwise romantic slice of life takes a sudden turn. In the closing credit sequence she lists all of the countries that in 1991 outlawed same-sex marriages. This title sequence asks us to reread the film; the scenes we have seen in the film and the romantic music that helps set the mood are tied exclusively to heterosexual romance, something, this title sequence reminds us, same-sex couples cannot, by law, experience.

Experimental films ask us to confront difficult material presented in an unfamiliar and challenging form. These films make the difficult entertaining, or by design challenge the notion that cinema should or must be diverting; the filmmakers take us out of our comfort zone, so to speak, and ask us to focus even more keenly on the constitutive elements of film form: mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound. With experimental films the question "what was that film about?" can't be answered, even initially, with plot summary or an easy comparison to another similar film. Instead, experimental films require of us some hard work and a willingness to indulge and explore the ways in which nontraditional forms and styles might be used on-screen.

The pleasure of these texts, then, is much like the pleasure felt at solving a puzzle. These films ask us to reflect on our basic assumptions about film form and mass culture; they pose alternatives that prompt reflection and analysis. When we watch these films, we acknowledge that art need not be easy or accessible or user-friendly to be meaningful.

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Documentary, animated, and experimental films offer a rewarding alternative to live-action narrative films, with unique histories and concerns. A close reading of these films can examine how they adhere to and deviate from the principles of film form that we examined in chapters 2 through 6.

8-1 DOCUMENTARY

Learning Outcome: ***Identify and analyze the different goals and techniques of documentary filmmaking from the earliest short films to the present.***

- Documentaries present themselves as works of nonfiction, as factual and trustworthy, and ask us to view them as such.
- Slice-of-life documentaries and actualities in early cinema shared a basic goal: to preserve for posterity everyday life.
- One of the most popular late-silent/early-sound era documentary genres was the ethnographic (including travelogue) film. These films gave filmgoers a look at places and cultures from the far reaches of the globe.
- During the worldwide economic Depression, the lead-up to World War II, and then the war years themselves, many nonfiction filmmakers fully embraced the persuasive power of the big screen and produced films to propose and promote a political agenda.
- Filmmakers in the direct cinema movement that took shape in the United States in the early 1960s used techniques that implied objectivity to present a "direct," unmediated event.
- Many contemporary documentary filmmakers use a subjective, or first-person, style to comment on, react to, and even prompt or stage the events on screen. These filmmakers make no claim to objectivity in taking on contemporary issues.

8-2 ANIMATION

Learning Outcome: ***Recognize and appreciate the diversity of animation styles and the blend of artistic imagination and technological innovation that have characterized the development of this film category.***

- Cine-animation began with hand-crafted, pen-and-ink drawings, then moved on to illustrations on transparent cels produced by studio teams and then photographed by a camera designed to produce a single image from multiple layers, to stop-motion figure manipulation, and most recently to computer modeling and imaging captured in 3-D.
- The history of animation is at once a matter of technological development and creative enterprise; it is tied as much to evolving techniques and industrial innovation as it is to creative impulse and imagination.
- Many of the same critical concepts we use to read live-action films come into play when we read animated features: there is a narrative, often organized into three acts, structured around complex characters (or at least characters with complex emotions); and there is discernible visual and sound design.

8-3 EXPERIMENTAL FILM

Learning Outcome: ***Develop an awareness and understanding of films that deliberately attempt to shock, provoke, and challenge audiences by breaking the rules of conventional filmmaking and society.***

- Experimental and avant-garde filmmakers dramatically push at the boundaries of cinematic expression and in doing so challenge widely held notions of what movies can or should be.
- Experimental films may be entirely nonnarrative, focusing on images or sounds in and of themselves. The goal is not to represent reality through narrative but instead to evoke the personal, the psychological, and the intimate through filmic images and sounds.
- Surrealists created and juxtaposed images and utterances devoid of reason, control, order, and moral preoccupation. While mainstream cinema tells stories that have a cause-and-effect logic, surrealist cinema is by design and intent more random and absurd.
- The New American Cinema Group founded a new cinematic realism by slowing down the pace of scenes, allowing for scripted and unscripted dialogue and actions. The camera work had an improvisational feel as well, and the mise-en-scène appeared found rather than built and dressed.
- Many of the women making experimental films have explored women's issues from a feminist point of view.

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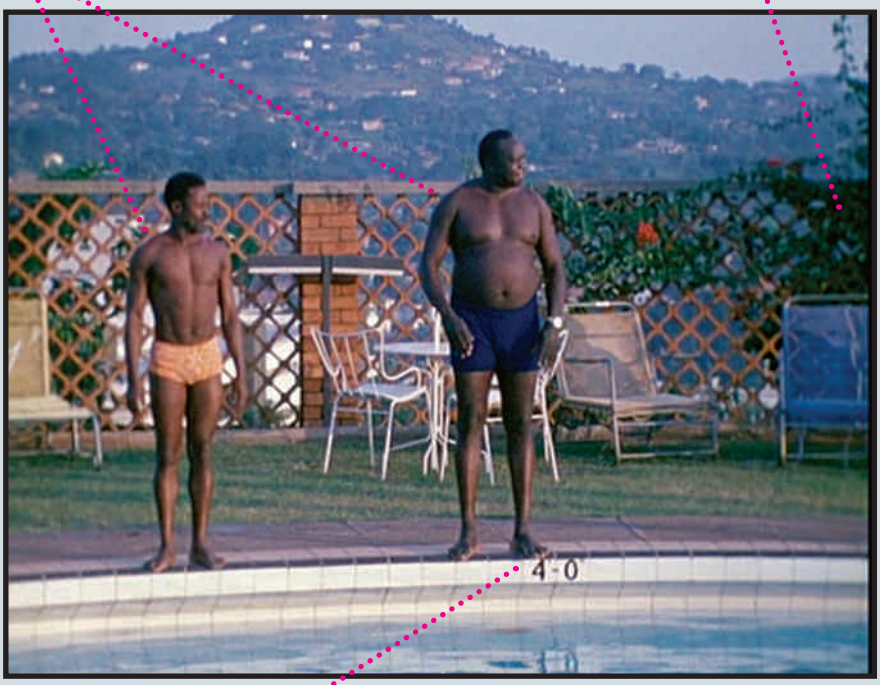
FOCUS on Analyzing Documentary: *General Idi Amin Dada*

Barbet Schroeder's 1974 documentary *General Idi Amin Dada* focused on the neurotic, ruthless Ugandan despot (His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr. Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE) at the height of his power. When the film was edited and readied for release, Amin demanded three cuts and held a number of French nationals captive in Uganda's capital until Schroeder made the changes. The director complied and Amin gave the film his endorsement. Schroeder initially released the film with Amin credited as the director and himself as an assistant. When Amin fell from power in 1979, Schroeder restored the edited footage and current prints credit him as director.

The image below shows Amin preparing for a swimming race. He is a lousy swimmer, but he will win. Indeed, his opponent is smart enough to stop mid-way across the pool. Absent commentary and captured live (the race is filmed from preparation through completion in one shot), the scene nonetheless tells us a lot about Amin and his subjects.

The framing of the image highlights scale (Amin is huge; his opponent is shorter and far skinnier). The scene is a document of a true event, but the full-figure long shot adds a comic touch.

The camera captures both men looking to the left. The camera subsequently zooms out to show the other participants in the race (who are lined up to their left). Much as in a fiction film, the gaze of the characters cues a change in framing.



The long shot also allows us to see the depth of the pool where Amin has chosen to swim. It's a clever hint at what's to come: the dictator is a comically poor swimmer. Mise-en-scène may well be a matter of chance or luck here, but it does guide our reading of the scene.

Sound: Though there is a lot of voice-over narration in the film, this scene includes only diegetic dialogue (Amin taunting his opponents) and sound effects (splashing and swimming). There is no need for commentary; the scene speaks for itself.

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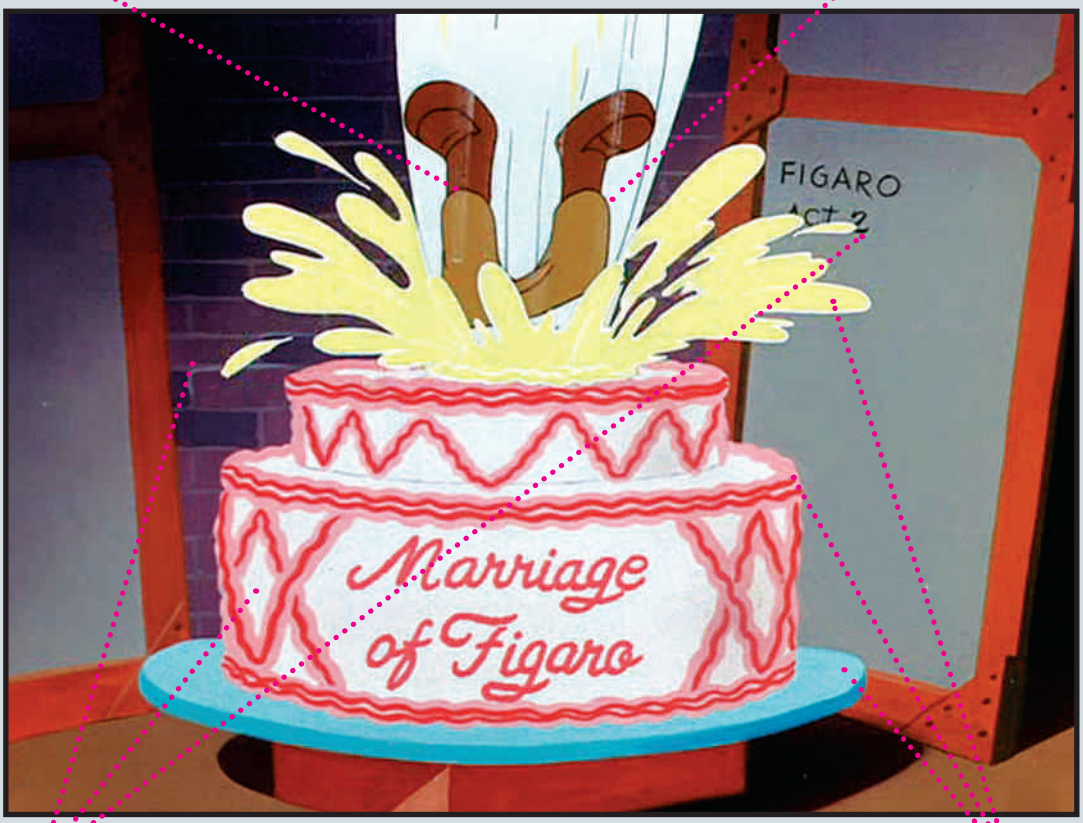
FOCUS on Animation: *Rabbit of Seville*

Rabbit of Seville is a Bugs Bunny/Elmer Fudd short directed by Chuck Jones for Warner Bros. in 1950. The film begins with Bugs running from Fudd. Bugs takes refuge on stage during a performance of Gioachino Rossini's opera "The Barber of Seville," which Bugs quickly takes over, much to Fudd's bad fortune. Set to sped-up performances of the opera's overture and arias, Bugs drives his nemesis crazy. The cartoon climaxes with the image below as Fudd lands upside-down in a cake wondering what happened and why it had to happen to him.

This cartoon is structured around a series of knockabout stunts or gags. The biggest gag, Fudd's fall into the wedding cake, gives closure to the narrative.

As with most Warner Bros. cartoons, the emphasis is on the speedy, anarchic flow of images and sounds, true to the genre's roots in silent, live-action comedy.



The animation technique used by Chuck Jones features drawn and painted work on cels that are then photographed by the multiplane camera. Note the simulation of depth with cast shadows and objects in the foreground, middle ground, and background.

Sound: Throughout we hear (often sped-up) excerpts from the opera. True to the Warner Bros. formula, many of the gags are accompanied by classical music. The scene also features radio-style sound effects and the expert voice-work of Mel Blanc.

A big part of the Warner Bros. style was the use of vibrant color.

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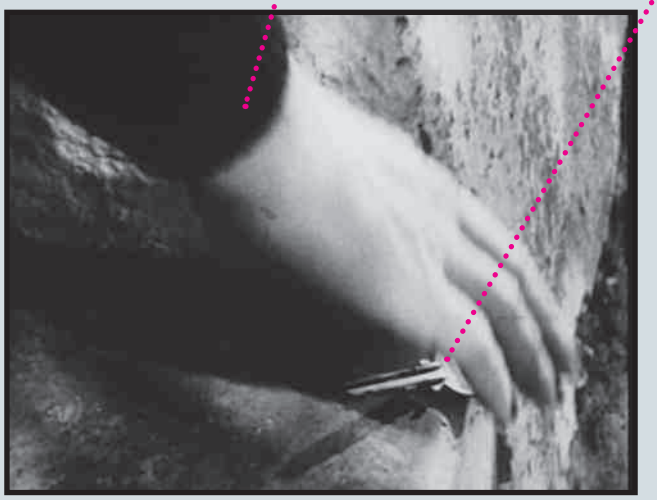
FOCUS on Experimental Film: *Meshes of the Afternoon*

In *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid use the purely physical world of cinema (live characters, real settings, props) to evince the interior experiences of an individual. The absence of a coherent narrative and the emphasis on odd juxtapositions, manipulations of mise-en-scène and camera focus, and the repetition and transformation of objects evoke the illogic of the subconscious as opposed to a linear, structured plot. As with many experimental films, we focus on strategies of mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound in order to analyze how the film's experiments with form relate to its purpose, its effect, and, ultimately, its meaning.

The high-angle, subjective camera position shows the key and the woman's hand on the stairs from the character's point of view.

The most important prop in the film is a key, which we see at several points. In these scenes we see the key tumble down the stairs as the woman scampers behind it, and we see the key magically appear from between her lips. We never discover what the key opens or more simply how it got into her mouth.



This close-up neatly juxtaposes the woman with her mirror image. This doubling is a characteristic of the film, in which actions and images are repeated, often in slight variation.

Editing: At one point we dissolve from a shot of the key to a shot of a bread knife. This implies an analogy, but one tied solely to the illogic of the woman's subconscious. No narrative connection between these objects is made clear, though such an editing strategy suggests there might or should be.

Sound: The film has no synchronous sound—no dialogue or voice-over track and no sound effects to match the images we see. Instead there is a mostly discordant music track that for the most part does not relate directly to the images on screen. For example, when the key falls down the stairs, we hear the tapping of a bongo drum. The music roughly simulates the sound of the key tumbling down the stairs, but the drumbeats do not correspond directly to each time the key touches the concrete. The bongo music can be heard elsewhere in the film, even when nothing on-screen makes a similar noise. The other motif on the music track is a prolonged discordant horn note. It sounds ominous but how it relates to the images on screen is never direct or clear.

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ANALYZE DOCUMENTARY, ANIMATED, AND EXPERIMENTAL FILMS

Choose a film or range of films from each category, and use the questions below to begin thinking critically about it.

8-1 DOCUMENTARY	• What is the subject and purpose of the film? • Does the film aim to be objective or does it relate the filmmaker's personal story and/or point of view? • How is the film structured? Does it lead you to a particular conclusion about or interpretation of the film's subject? • Does the film present evidence for an argument or truth claim using any of these devices: suggestive graphics, voice-of-God narration, talking-head segments, and the sampling or compiling of film clips from other documentary sources? Does the evidence support the claims? Are there any flaws in the argument?
8-2 ANIMATION	• What animation method was used to create the film? • Why might this story have been conceived as an animated rather than live-action film? What does animation allow the filmmakers to do or express? • Describe the overall look of the characters and sets and the qualities of the voices, music, and sound effects. What kind of mood and tone do they create? • Who is the primary audience for this film? Do the filmmakers attempt to appeal to both adults and children, and, if so, how?
8-3 EXPERIMENTAL FILM	• What makes this film experimental or avant-garde? What conventions of filmmaking or society does it challenge? • Is the film narrative or nonnarrative? If nonnarrative, what seems to be the organizing idea? • How does the film experiment with basic visual elements like camera focus, makeup, and props? • Is the film ironic, camp, or in particularly bad taste? If so, how? • Does the film make you think about women's lives or the experiences of a subculture in a new and different way? If so, how?

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